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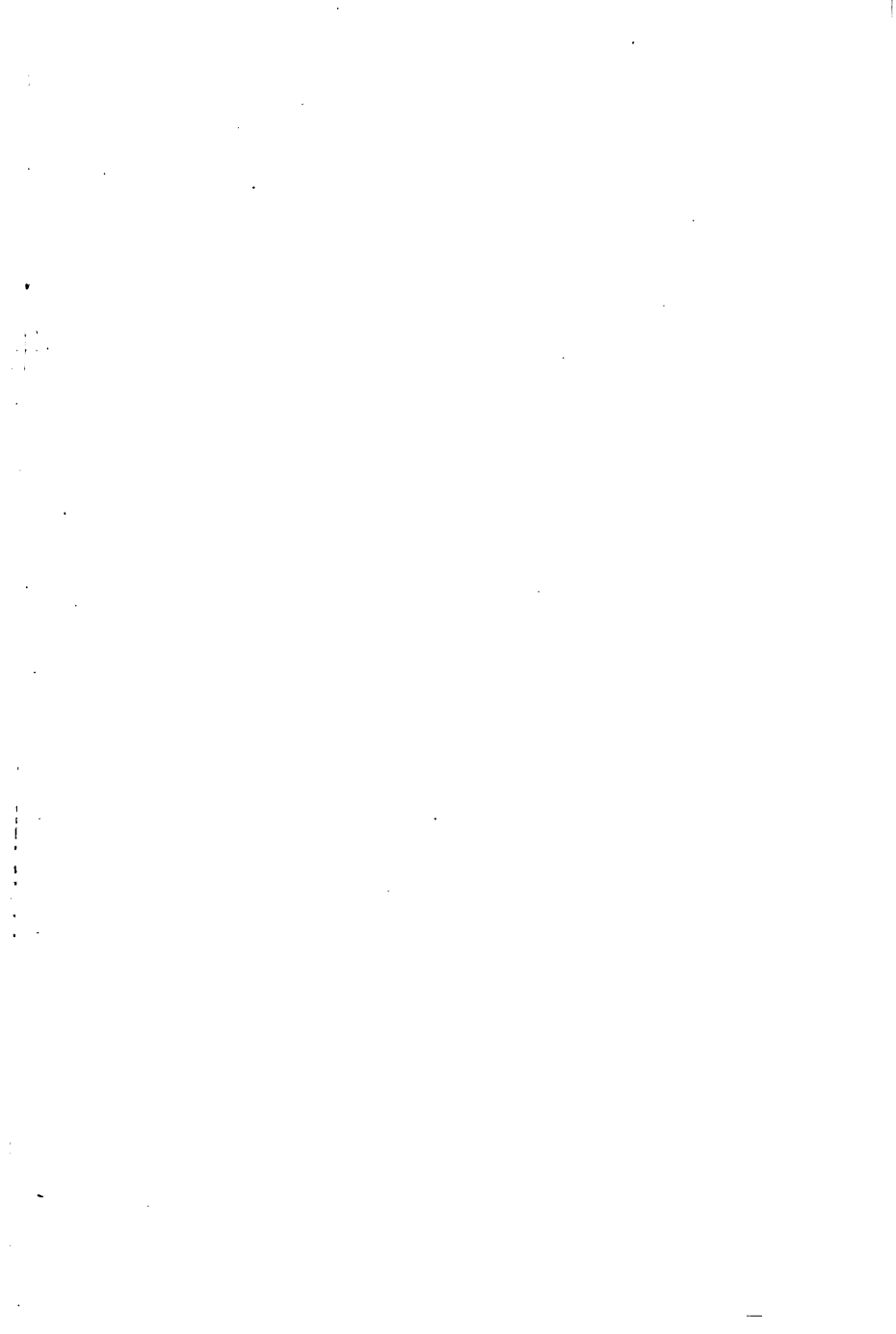
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Thonger







"THE BEES"

**THE STORY OF THE "B" TRIPLETS
AND THEIR AUNT**

BY

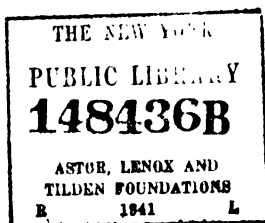
M. ELLEN THONGER

AUTHOR OF "JOCK AND I AND THE HYDRA"

**G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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TO
MY MOTHER AND SISTER

Br 7/22

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“THE BEES”



"THE BEES"

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCES THE BEES

NO one quite knew why they were called "The Bees."

Some thought it was because of the low, buzzing noise which used to proceed from their three cradles when they were all happy at the same time—the kind of noise which one hears on a warm summer day when one is near a hive.

Others thought it was because their names all began with B—Bob, Bennie, and Burton. At least, that was the order in which they were given when Bob was questioned. If it were Bennie who was answering, he said, "Bennie, Burton, and Bob." And if Burton, he replied, "Burton, Bob, and Bennie." The fact is that when three babies arrive on the scene at nearly the same time people are apt to become confused, and it is not to be wondered at if no one is sure which was the first comer. The bees themselves were quite satisfied that it should be so. It would have been very annoying if one could have claimed superiority.



A third party thought that their own first attempts at pronouncing each other's names might have something to do with it.

There were many other suggestions, more or less likely, but these were the principal; and even of these no one could say which was right. The only thing that remained was the fact—"the bees" they had been, "the bees" they were, and, if Bennie, Burton, and Bob had anything to do with the matter, "the bees" they intended to remain. About this all three were very particular.

Another thing which nobody knew was why they should always be called Burton, Bob, and Bennie. The bees themselves did what they chose, but nobody else thought of saying Bobbie, Benson, and Burt, or Ben, Burtie, and Robert.

As for Bob, nothing made him so angry as to be reminded that in his full name he was not a bee at all. On dignified occasions, such as when he sent in his accounts to his brothers for medical attendance, he was most careful to sign himself Robert Burnham; and when they sent their cheques by return of post, they were equally particular to make them out to Dr. B. Burnham. The bees approved of cheques. Of course, no one would have dreamed of giving away his Saturday penny, or even half of it, but doctors like big cheques—they had heard father say so—and they were easy enough to write, so long as they could tear a leaf out of their cheque-book—an old Bradshaw—and get at the ink-pot when nurse was out of the way, and no one any the poorer.

The bees' illnesses varied according to the weather. If it were fine they were mostly well, and the ordinary

account was twopence halfpenny, threepence, or somewhere about that sum; but if it were wet it often increased greatly. On one occasion when there had been four days of pouring rain it actually mounted up to one shilling. But even that can scarcely be considered exorbitant when one considers what Dr. Bob had pulled them through. They had begun with scarlet fever, and then had run the gauntlet of measles, mumps, catarrh, and the black plague. Catarrh proved almost fatal to Bennie. He had never heard of it before, and was so frightened that the doctor had to use all his skill to heal him quickly. He took the black plague immediately afterwards, but he did n't mind that. He had suffered from that ailment dozens of times, and was quite indifferent to it. Scarlet fever was sometimes rather difficult to get. It took time to rub sufficient red—red is such a very hard paint—to make spots all over the hands and face, and nurse was apt to come down like the wolf on the fold, snatch away the box, and deliver hard slaps. The mumps cannot be endured for long. It is trying to keep one's cheeks puffed out. The same objection applies to measles as to scarlet fever, the spots having to be blue. The bees knew this, because they had heard nurse speak of some one feeling very blue when that illness was feared. But the black plague was easily managed. Just one big ink spot on a sturdy little chest, where no one could see it till bath time. And even if the ink were ungetatable, paint would do, or, under stress of circumstances, a licked finger rubbed on a piece of coal makes a very satisfactory plague spot.

The bees lived in a large pleasant nursery which was shut off from the rest of the house by a baize door.

Of course, there were other rooms—the night nursery, for instance—but that was only used for sleeping purposes, and one cannot call sleeping *living*—it is merely a preparation for the life of the next day. When they were young and innocent the room had also been used as a punishment chamber, but as they grew older they had artfully put a stop to that. It had taken a good deal of consideration how to manage it, but the bees were not accustomed to be thwarted when they had set their minds on a thing. The plan of campaign was arranged. As soon as a bee was naughty, and nurse descended upon him with the customary "Now you shall be punished!" he begged: "Let me be shut up in the night nursery, nurse. Do let me!" Nurse was not a woman who saw beyond the end of her nose, and after a dozen or so of these eager appeals she came to the conclusion that there was some attraction in that room which unfitted it to be used as a punishment chamber. Therefore solitary confinement—which the bees hated—fell into disuse; and their loud pleadings that any punishment—*any* punishment—might be given rather than that they should have to sit on a chair—a thing which, though rather annoying, was light in comparison with loneliness—caused her to think that that form of trial was peculiarly fitted to the sinner. Thus was wickedness triumphant, and virtue beguiled.

In the other parts of the house the bees were merely occasional visitors.

Of all the people with whom they dwelt nurse was the most important. She was tall and respectable-looking—"a highly respectable and most superior person, my dears," Mrs. Burnham informed her

friends. "I never have the slightest trouble with the children. She is a woman whom I can trust." She wore white dresses in the summer, and a closely fitting bonnet, and in the winter a long and graceful cloak. When the three bees walked along, hand in hand, most daintily dressed, their rosy faces shining with soap and water, their ruddy hair standing out like a halo round their heads, and nurse moved behind them in all her purity of dress and dignity of appearance, it was, indeed, a turn-out of which any lady might be proud. Nurse had such a pleasant, courteous manner towards her mistress, and if that lady happened to express a wish, was so deferential and obedient that it is no wonder that she was regarded as a treasure. As for the children, no one thought of asking them if they liked her, or if that suave tone lingered when their mother had gone. Nor would they have expressed any opinion had they been asked. Nurse was there—that was all. Part of the scheme of life. Something to be ignored if in a good temper, and dodged if in a bad one.

Fanny was of very secondary importance to nurse. She helped to dress and undress the children, cleaned the nursery, waited on it in the matter of meals and coal, and, in fact, did what she was bid. When she could no longer put up with "that woman's domineering ways" she disappeared, and another Fanny came. The same Fanny never stayed long.

Downstairs there was a beautiful lady called "mother." Her the bees regarded with unlimited admiration. Her dresses were so lovely, her hats so marvellous, her whole appearance so charming as to render them nearly breathless with delight. Many a

time did they creep out of their beds, and, crawling to the head of the stairs, lean over and watch the shimmering, sparkling vision below as it passed out to some grand ball or other function. Once a day nurse scrubbed and combed her charges, and, taking off their overalls, put on pretty suits, and mother visited them for a few minutes—at least if nothing important, such as an At Home, or a visitor, or a book to read, or a disinclination to run up-stairs, intervened. And if it did—well, it did n't matter. Nurse was so very reliable. She would enter the room, and, sinking down gracefully into the easiest chair, kiss the bees in turn—unless, as sometimes happened, she made the mistake of kissing Bennie or Burton twice, and missing out Bob altogether. It was always Bob who was missed. He was not quite so ready to receive kisses as Bennie and Burton. Then she asked a few questions as to whether they had been good, or were quite well, or needed any new clothes, and after that there was little to be said. Once, greatly daring, Bennie had tried to climb on to her lap—he would have been a loving little fellow had there been any one who cared for his affection—but he never repeated the attempt. "Dear me, child! What do you want?" mother asked, with a slight crease on her white forehead. "Look at my dress! Positively I shall have to change it! It is not fit to be seen! What do you want?"

"Only to sit on your knee," whispered the abashed culprit.

"Then you are old enough to know better. Don't let me have to say this again. I think, nurse, you might manage to keep the children in order."

No one said a word, but when she had gone three little figures huddled together. The bees were always kind to one another. Bennie cried, Burton rubbed his eyes, and Bob stared straight before him. There was a dull ache in the three little hearts which troubled them, but no one thought of complaining. It was beautiful mother, so it must be right.

One other person was of some importance in their lives. And that was father. He rarely came to the nursery, but every now and then he sent for one of his boys. Nurse always dispatched the one who had been naughtiest. Father lived in a large room with windows at the top as well as at the side. The walls were covered with pictures, which were also stacked about the floor, on nearly every available seat, and on big, leggy things which the bees called "easys." He was usually busy painting, and wore a kind of overall, very much like those in use in the nursery. The bees hated the studio. A visit there meant that the victim was called upon to put himself into some trying, or objectionable, attitude. He had to lie on a green carpet covered with flowers, with one leg bent stiffly under him, and his head on a small aching arm, and be called "Sleep." Or he had to take off his coat and vest, and have some silly drapery round him, and turn up the whites of his eyes to the ceiling, and be called "Childish Fancies." Or he had to have most of his clothes removed, and to hold a small bow and arrow—which he was n't allowed to shoot—and be called "Love." Or he had to sprawl on the ground with his arm round a big, handsome Newfoundland's neck, and be called "Playmates." This last might have been interesting, except that father was cross

whenever a patting hand coaxed a lick from a red tongue.

Occasionally mother would send for them to help at her At Home, and then, prettily dressed in velvets and laces, they would hand round cups of tea and cakes to ladies, who would kiss them and ask their names. In the latter case the bees always took care that the same one should not approach the questioner again. It was their pride to keep their identity undiscovered. So when some one said, "Burton, is it? Will you bring me a biscuit, Burton?" it would be Bennie or Bob who took the required refreshment, and accepted with inward glee the "Thank you, Burton," with which he was rewarded.

At times, too, they would be invited to take dessert with their parents, and they listened with attention to the conversation that went on around them from the soldiers, sailors, statesmen, actors, writers, artists—in fact, the lions of all sizes with whom Mr. and Mrs. Burnham loved to fill their house. Many and curious were the ideas which they picked up, and great would have been the astonishment of the assembled company had they known the thoughts that were working so actively in the little red heads. Their manners on these occasions were absolute perfection. They knew too much to let them be otherwise. A sharp word and instant dismissal would follow anything but the most immaculate behaviour. Also the bees quite understood that in this they stood, or fell, together. In earlier days, before they had realised that no nonsense would be allowed, they had discovered that the dismissal of one meant the dismissal of all. Both parents acted as though the three had one personality. And

very much astonished would father and mother have been had they been told the characters of the little triplicate, so similar in appearance, were very different. Nurse knew; but nurse was never asked.

In nearly all games and childish adventures Burton was the ringleader. Impetuous and energetic, he went headlong into things, and often, by sheer audacity, carried them through. Little thought for the future had Burton. But when dash failed, then Bennie took up the running. From the first he was on the look-out for contingencies, and the best way of averting, or taking advantage, of them. When he owned himself beaten, sturdy Bob's lack of knowledge as to when he was conquered came in usefully. A strong trio when they combined, as nurse knew to her cost.

Early in life had the bees fixed upon their future callings. It had taken some time and consideration, as, in addition to a man's usual difficulties, they also were unable to contemplate anything that would divide them. And their tastes were widely different. But by paying close attention to the conversation of the men who visited at their house, at such times as they had opportunity, and showing a stolidity of demeanour which would have made every one in the room vow that their whole attention was engaged upon bananas, oranges, grapes, etc., they had at last decided—and once decided were training themselves, to the best of their ability, to the desired end. Circumstances had arisen which necessitated their telling these intentions to their elders. It happened this way.

Grandpa had travelled up to town for the purpose of meeting his younger son, Philip, at the house of

the elder son—the bees' father. Of course, grandpa arrived punctual to the minute—he always did. Equally of course Uncle Philip was late—he always was. So, as time was precious, and grandpa might not have any after the interview, the bees were sent for to pay their respects in the interval. As it chanced, they were out walking, but on their return were sent down. In the meantime Uncle Philip had arrived, and when they opened the door they found that the meeting had been very stormy indeed. Grandpa was a tall, handsome, upright man, with white hair, a white moustache, and very keen, stern blue eyes. Uncle Philip was also handsome; but the weakness of the mouth under the drooping moustache, and a look of irresolution in the eyes, spoiled an otherwise good-looking face. A man whose life would be shaped and coloured by the shape and colour of the lives about him—not one to be trusted in temptation, or to stand alone, was Uncle Philip. Without any inclination to do otherwise than right, yet his desire for popularity, and a fatal inability to say "No," had already led him far wrong. Also he had a Richard Carstone-like ability for entering into new businesses, working at them enthusiastically for a while, and then wearying. Again and again had he been dismissed with the same complaint: "Careless, indifferent, untrustworthy. Good abilities, but no application."

On the present occasion his usually easy expression was clouded into sullenness, and he shifted from one foot to the other like a rebuked school-boy.

As the bees stood at the door, looking in with solemn eyes, grandpa struck his right fist into his left palm, and delivered his ultimatum.

"This is the last time, Philip; do you understand? I wonder how often I have set you straight, and started you afresh. But this is the last! You have one more chance, and if you can't stick to this you may shift for yourself. I wash my hands of you. You must have tried most things under the sun, I think."

Uncle Philip cheered up amazingly. So he was to be helped once more, was he? It was almost more than he had expected. He had had to eat a considerable amount of humble pie, and to listen to a good deal which might as well have been left unsaid—what was the good of raking up old scores?—but it was all right now. The present was relieved—let the future look after itself. And, anyhow, he never intended to be so foolish again. He had n't *intended* to be so foolish before, but somehow—well, things happened. He really was a most unlucky chap; but it was all right now. The governor was a decent kind of old boy, after all!

At this point in his meditations he became aware of the presence of his three nephews, and hailed them with delight. What a blessing the little chaps had turned up! It would put an end to all unpleasantness.

"Hullo, bees!" he said gaily. "How are you? Come to see naughty uncle, have you? It is n't so easy to make up one's mind as to one's right position in life all at once, is it? What will you be, little chaps?"

"A soldier," said Burton, usually the first to speak. "I shall go to Injia's coral strand and lead men to fight. I shall be Captain Burton."

"A doctor," added Bob. "An army doctor. I shall physic the army—Dr. Bob."

"An engineer," finished Bennie. "I'm going to build bridges and make roads for the troops. I'll be Sir Bennie."

There was a momentary pause. A flush of something like shame rose to Uncle Philip's face as he looked at the sturdy little figures.

"Why *Sir* Bennie?" he asked, trying to hide his confusion with a laugh.

"He must have heard Sir George Reynolds talk of his engineering work, and concluded that the title went with the profession," suggested their astonished father.

Grandpa smiled grimly. "You will have trouble with your sons, Grant,—I never knew the man who had not,—but I don't think it will be caused by indecision of character."

CHAPTER II

THE BEES TAKE A WALK

“GET up at once, and dress.” Nurse entered, and with one sweep of her foot destroyed the erection of bricks which the bees had been building for the last hour. Then seizing Burton, who happened to be nearest, by the arm, she dragged him to his feet. Underlings copy the manners of their superiors. The present Fanny pulled Bob up equally roughly.

The bees were accustomed to this kind of treatment. They gave one wistful look at their ruined work, and submitted their small persons to be hauled this way, and pushed that, to have their faces scrubbed with the same amount of energy which nurse saw that Fanny expended on the floor, and their curly red hair to be combed and brushed with the same lack of gentleness. It was a point of honour not to whimper during the process.

Burton and Bob had enough to do to conceal their sufferings, but Bennie, still awaiting his turn, and secretly hoping that Fanny, who was a trifle less energetic, would finish first, ventured to ask:

“Are we going to the park, or to the shops, nurse?”

“Ask no questions, and you'll be told no lies,”

snapped that highly respectable and most superior person.

Experience had taught the wisdom of obedience, so no one spoke till all were ready, when Burton asked:

"May we take something to play with?"

"No, you may not!"

Having expected no more favourable reply the bees suffered no great disappointment.

"Catch hands!" commanded nurse, as they left the house and turned to the left.

This was a regulation command.

"It's Bennie's turn for the middle," said Burton. And Bennie nodded.

The position of middleman was peculiarly objectionable. The one on the outside could pull towards the road, and have the pleasure of walking on the curb, and the one on the inside could drag towards the shops. The middle man also felt it acutely when, for some reason, the *inside* man desired to move to the curb and the *outside* to the shops simultaneously. In such cases he was badly mauled. Also the two outsiders had one hand each at liberty, whereas the unlucky centrepiece could merely point out objects of interest with his nose, and his only privilege was that, by lending his weight to one side or the other, he could have that amount of choice in their movements. It being the bees' plan to share and share alike in pleasure or in pain, they took it in turns to walk in all three positions.

The turn to the left meant the park, unless they went down a side road which led to a few shops. The bees walked along, accepting with customary non-

chance the admiration of passers-by. Many of the men glanced with amused interest at the three, and as for the women, if one ventured to pass without a smile, or an audible "What darlings!" or something of that nature, they felt defrauded of their rightful inheritance. From earliest infancy had they lived in a blaze of public interest. It was something to be regarded with indifference if accorded, but the withholding of it was an insult. To do the bees justice they fully realised that it was their combined charms which attracted so much attention, and on those rare occasions when they were out singly they expected none.

As they passed the end of the street which led to the shops and it became evident that the park was their destination, Burton said:

"Nurse might have let us bring something."

"She was in a trantrum," suggested Bennie.

Still hand-in-hand they walked up the long path, over the grass and past the lake.

At this point three pairs of eyes blazed with sudden excitement, and three breathless voices whispered:

"A new boatman, bees! a new boatman!"

On one never-to-be-forgotten occasion they had managed to evade nurse, to coax an unusually good-natured keeper of the boats into taking them on the water, and—greatest feat of all—had not been found out. Since then they had lived in hope of repeating the pleasure, but so far without success. The different boatmen, who never stayed long, had proved unpersuadable. But hope rises eternal in the human breast, and every new man might be kind. Who knows!

Three stolid faces turned in another direction. Nothing was farther from their thoughts than the lake, unless it were the boats! Even their usual desire to visit the swans and ducks seemed to have deserted them. Nurse reflected with some complacency that, for the time being, she had reduced her charges to an unusually subdued frame of mind. To nurse, all walls were opaque.

A little farther on a large tree shading a seat brought them to a stop.

Nurse sat down. "Now, play!" she commanded.

No one protested that to play without playthings was difficult. The bees transformed themselves into a railway train, and trotted off, puffing, and working their hands up and down in imitation of the piston-rod. Every now and then nurse raised her head, and prepared to shout to them not to go so far, but always at the critical moment they headed back again, steam escaping and whistle blowing.

A gentleman in khaki strolled up, nodded familiarly, and seating himself on the bench proceeded to pass the time of day.

The bees stopped some distance away to throw themselves on the ground and roll awhile.

Time passed. A keen eye might have noted that the train was now puffing its way in a very different direction to that in which it had started. A still keener eye might have seen that the return journeys were growing shorter, and the outward ones longer. But there was no keen eye watching. By this time a khaki-coloured arm was round a highly respectable and most superior waist. With military decision Burton seized his opportunity. Whistle and steam

were shut off, and silently the bees passed away. Once out of sight they started off headlong.

There was the lake, there the boats, there themselves, and nowhere—nowhere was the boatman or nurse. With a shout they dashed down the stage.

"Come on, bees! Tumble in, my hearties!" shouted Burton, plunging into the largest boat he could see, as being most like an Atlantic Liner. His brothers obeyed literally, and the impetus of their entry sending the craft out several yards they found themselves actually afloat on mid-ocean, and in imminent danger of a watery grave. All three made for the oars. Burton and Bob grasping them first, Bennie turned his attention to the rudder, and catching hold of the lines pulled them from side to side as fast and hard as he could.

"Where shall we go, captain?" shouted Bob.

When engaged in certain kinds of games the bees used the titles which they intended to win in manhood. It made them feel more important.

"Injia's coral strand," responded Burton, with his usual promptness and decision. "Which is the way, Sir Bennie?"

Bennie, as a future maker of roads, was always expected to point them out now. He proved equal to the occasion.

"Straight down the map, and turn to the left."

No directions have ever better combined brevity with fulness.

By this time Burton had managed to push his heavy oar into the water, and was trying to grasp the handle. It proved unwieldy. "I say, doctor,

I'd be much obliged if—" The polite appeal changed. "Bob, I say, Bob! Grab it! Help!"

Bob grabbed it, but too late. The gallant captain pitched head-over-heels backward, and the oar floated out just beyond reach.

They looked dismayed. They had n't intended to be really wicked. That oar must be recaptured at whatever cost. They sprawled over the side, stretching themselves out as far as possible. The boat heeled dangerously, but fortunately it was a regular old family ark.

"Almost touched it!" panted Burton.

The three wriggled on board again, and began rocking to and fro, in hope of moving a bit nearer.

"Tell you what!" said Bob. "If you two will hold on to my legs I b'lieve I could stretch farther."

Again he wriggled out. "One little bit more!" he panted, able to touch, but not to grasp.

At this moment a piercing scream made all three jump violently.

"Master Bees, you naughty, wicked boys! Get in at once!"

Fortunate it was that it was Bob who was in the position of danger—Bob, who rarely allowed himself to be flurried or disturbed.

After the first start he merely said coolly, "One scrap more, bees! just one scrap!" and again applied himself to the work in hand, while nurse made the welkin ring with her shrieks.

"Go back, Master Bob! Pull him in, Master Burton! Master Bennie, do you hear me! Oh, where's anybody to help! Come here, man! Come here, and bring those boys in!" she screamed to the

advancing boatman. "They'll be drowned! They'll be drowned! Master Bob, never mind the oar! Sit down, Master Bees!" as the three tried to make the most of the last few moments of liberty by jumping over the seats.

As each small boy was swung ashore nurse shook him till his teeth chattered in his head. "Home you go this very minute!" she said, desisting when she was tired.

But the bees did not wish this. Early going home meant quicker punishment.

"Look here! Need we, if we give our sacred word and honour not to go near the water again to-day?" asked Bennie. He had been lifted out first, and had had most time to recover.

Nurse hesitated. The soldier had an agreeable flow of conversation and compliment, and had hinted that he should not be long before returning to the park. To sit out-of-doors with a companion was pleasanter than in a nursery with three small scamps off whom she dare never take her eyes without something happening.

She made a favour of yielding to her own desires. "It's your sacred word and honour, then, you bad boys!"

She had absolute confidence in their keeping their word. Even when one promised for all, the bees stood faithful.

"Very well. Come back to the grass, and try to be good if you can! It is n't every boy who has such a kind nurse!"

"No," agreed Bob thoughtfully, with his eyes fixed upon a gentleman in khaki who was sauntering towards them.

Nurse looked hard at him, but decided that it **would** be wiser to say nothing. She turned away and sat down.

The bees removed themselves as far as they dared from her vicinity, and, sprawling on the grass, debated ways and means of eluding her in the future, when no longer handicapped by their sacred word; after which they looked round for fresh amusement. Trains were played out for the present, but their last adventure having given their minds a nautical turn they transformed themselves into a noble vessel. Holding their handkerchiefs by two corners high above their heads as sails, and forming into line, they ploughed the stormy main swaying in unison from side to side, either gently or as much as they could still to preserve their balance, according as they floated over sunny seas or encountered gales. In the latter case the sh-sh-sh of the water against the side, and the roar of the wind in the rigging, was as stupendous as three throats could make it. Twice did the man on the look-out cry, "Breakers ahead!" and each time the gallant ship rolled completely on to its side, and again recovered; but at the third time the wreck was total; the vessel broke up and disappeared. At the same time Burton sang out:

"Hullo, doctor! you 're wanted."

Bob rose to find where his professional services were required.

Sitting on a seat, not far away, was a boy. At least he had been a boy once, but now was arrayed in long trousers, cloth coat, and a cap at the back of his head, and had evidently left boyhood far behind.

To think of that close-cropped hair ever being long and curly was beyond the power of imagination, while even to dream of velvets, silks, and laces on that manly figure was desecration. But it was not his clothes that had attracted Burton's attention, but the fact that his head was drooping on his hands, and his whole attitude expressed dejection.

Long ago, after a big dinner-party, the bees had been invited to come down for a short time and have dessert. They had listened with their usual interest to an argument, in which an old, white-haired gentleman and a cynical young doctor had been the chief combatants. The old gentleman had said: "I am sorry to hear it! A man who can help only the body, and is unable to apply balm to a bruised soul, has not properly learned his profession. He is but half a doctor." Bob had puzzled over this, while apparently absorbed heart and soul in quartering an orange without breaking the skin and messing his fingers. What did it mean? What was wrong? At last, when conversation had become general, he slipped off his chair and made his way round. None of the bees knew the meaning of the word shyness.

He put a hand on the old gentleman's knee. "Please tell me what it means. *I'm* going to be a doctor when I grow up, and I won't be any half one. What must I do?"

The guest looked down at the earnest face with some curiosity. He did not smile. "A doctor must be a strong man and upright. He must be able to bring comfort to the sick, and help to those in sorrow; to point out the way of salvation to the dying sinner."

Then, realising how small was his questioner, he added: "A doctor must be a good man, Bee. He must be kind to everybody who is in trouble, as well as to those who are hurt and ill."

Bob meditated over this information. Half measures were abhorrent to him. If it were necessary to be good in order to be a doctor, good he must be—dodging nurse, of course, does not count as badness; that must be done—but no cheating, no lying, no cowardice or bullying,—and if doctors must be kind to all in trouble, kind he must be. He explained to his brothers that these things were necessary in order to gain a whole diploma, and nothing would make him content with a half one.

Therefore it was Bob's business to attend to the stranger in distress. His brothers might help, but, as part of his profession, he was permitted first chance, even as in the case of a fight which was not any one's affair in particular Captain Burton would be honourably informed, and allowed to dash in a second before the others, or in the matter of a choice of paths Sir Bennie's advice would be sought.

The three ran up, and Bob asked, "What's the matter? Never mind! Do tell us what is wrong."

CHAPTER III

CLARENCE

THE lad lifted his head, and gazed at the little figures.

"Oh, Gemini!" he ejaculated, forgetting his trouble in surprise.

This classical allusion, though not as apt as it might be, was the most appropriate he knew. Triplets were without parallel. Then he laughed. "Well, kiddies, where do you drop from? And what do you want?" he asked good-naturedly enough. Few strangers were unkind to the bees.

"Can we help you?" asked Bob. "What is wrong? And oh! what's that?"

His eyes fell on something clasped in the boy's hands. It was a rat. And such a rat! With the softest and whitest of skins, the pinkest of eyes, the most twitching and trembling of noses, and a tail of which any rodent might be proud.

"Is n't he a beauty?" demanded their new acquaintance, gratified by the burst of admiration. "Just look at him. He's as tame as anything."

He put the creature on the bench, where it crept along, smelling. "Clarence!" he called, and it turned back, and scampered to his knee, up his arm, and on to his shoulder, where it sat down and attended to its toilet.

"Is n't he a beauty!" repeated the boy. "Did you ever see his equal?"

The bees never had, and said so, and watched with admiration as it crawled through the ring made by joining two thumbs and two forefingers, ate a piece of biscuit, and retired to a pocket at the word of command. "He's the best of all my pets, and now I have to lose him," the lad confided. "I'm going to Australia to-morrow, and can't take him."

Burton nodded. "We started for Injia's coral strand this afternoon, but nurse brought us back."

"Oh, but I don't mean play! It's real. I've given all my pets away but Clarence, and I've just been to offer him to a school chum, but Jack's down with measles, and can't have him, and I don't know what I shall have to do. Drown him, I suppose."

In spite of years, long trousers, and the dignity of going abroad, there was something very much like tears in the boy's eyes.

The situation was beyond words. Drown that marvel of intelligence! Impossible! In silent horror three sympathetic forefingers smoothed a portion of the soft white fur.

"I'll tell you what! Will you have him? You'll be good to him, won't you?"

The bees' cheeks were crimson. "Us!" they gasped. "You'll give him to us?"

The boy caught up the little animal, pressed it against his cheek, and then, thrusting it upon Bennie, raced away, lest his courage should fail.

It had all happened so quickly that they had scarcely realised the offer before they were alone. Down they tumbled on the grass, and for the next

half-hour would not have exchanged places with the King of England.

"I say!" whispered Bennie, the wary. "Nurse is getting up to say good-bye. Who is to carry him home?"

"I'm a soldier," said Burton.

"I'm a doctor," said Bob.

"But he does n't want any fighting or medicine!" protested Bennie, combating these claims.

"He'll want both," said Bob, with unconscious grim humour, "if nurse finds him."

"Look here, bees! I'm the middleman. If I carry him he'll be ekally close to you both."

This was sound argument, and the other two reluctantly agreed. Clarence was slipped under Bennie's loose blouse, and without waiting for the usual command, "Catch hands!" the united bees walked off home, keeping just so far away from nurse that she could not see clearly, and yet not so far as to tempt her to run after them, and bestow a smack apiece. Long study had taught them the exact position. Had nurse possessed eyes that were able to see even as far round a corner as most people, she must have been suspicious as they walked along, ignoring both curb and shops. But she merely congratulated herself again on having, for the time being, quelled their spirits. They kept close together. Clarence, being of an adventurous nature, every now and then tried to slip round and get to the back of his prison, and Bennie was kept busy jamming first his right and then his left arm closely to his side. A moving excrescence behind could not fail to attract attention.

As they arrived near home a carriage containing

two ladies drove past. For a moment the rat was forgotten as three hats flew off, and three ruddy heads glistened in the sunshine. The bees' manners were charming.

One of the ladies nodded. The other turned and looked after them. "What darlings! Are they bowing to you, Mrs. Burnham? Whose are they?"

Mrs. Burnham was, for the moment, supremely happy. For long she had sought the friendship of the great lady beside her, and now, by a combination of fortunate circumstances, she was having the pleasure of driving with her for the first time.

"Mine," she responded in answer to the inquiry.

"Yours? I did n't know you had any children. How very much alike they are! Have you any more?"

"No! thank goodness! Three are quite enough! They are a triplet."

"And are they as much alike in character as in appearance?"

Mrs. Burnham shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose so. I really don't know. I don't know much about them. Nurse is a perfect treasure. Children are a great nuisance! Don't you think so?"

But it so happened that some months ago the great lady had lost a little boy, about the same age as the bees. The time for mourning prescribed by society being over, she was again in gay colours. But her heart persisted in declining to accept society's rulings, and took its own time for mourning, and still ached sorely, and wore black under the outward brightness.

So Mrs. Burnham's careless, unmotherly speech gave a sharp pang to the sorrowing heart, and her chance of friendship was gone for ever.

"As unloving as she is lovely," the great lady told her equally great husband afterwards, and both looked at a picture of a sunny-faced, laughing boy, and sighed.

Unconscious of the ruin of their mother's hopes which their appearance had caused, the bees raced up-stairs, and had just time to empty a box of bricks, slip Clarence inside, and thrust him into the play cupboard before nurse arrived. A knot-hole saved the poor creature from suffocation.

When they sat down to tea a broken mug, used for holding water for painting purposes, was under Bennie's overall. The meal proceeded with its usual decorum till nearly the end, when over went Burton's cup of milk. Of course nurse jumped up, and bestowed an angry shake upon the sinner. Contrary to his usual custom, Burton yelled and struggled, and had to be borne, still yelling and struggling, to a chair, and banged thereon. Then his cries ceased, and nurse turned her attention to the mess on the carpet. Bob and Bennie still sat at the table, but the mug under the overall was being carefully held lest the milk should spill, and a big slice of bread and butter was greasing Bob's pocket.

Had nurse been an observant woman, she might have wondered at the desire of her charges for an early retiring. Only too delighted at the idea of getting rid of them, she agreed. Again she might have marvelled at the instantaneous manner in which all three dropped asleep the moment their heads touched the pillow. But nurse never noticed things until she was obliged. Therefore, with a sigh of relief she left the room, and went down-stairs for a chat. The sound of

her footsteps had not died away before three little white-robed figures were crouched by the broad window-seat, informing Clarence that he was a good chap, a dear boy, a poor fellow. With the last title Clarence was in accord. He had not enjoyed his stay in the brick-box. It had been a tight fit, and was very hard to lie on. Also once, when he had accidentally got his back against the knot-hole, his sensations had been distinctly unpleasant. His smooth fur was ruffled; so were his feelings. Clarence was annoyed. At first he took no notice of the offered bread and milk, but after a while he calmed down, and when the bees had mixed some together he condescended to eat, and even took a little out of Burton's hand.

"He must n't go back into the brick-box," said Bob.

"'T is n't big enough. 'Sides, I don't b'lieve there's enough fresh air. Doctors are always partic'lar about fresh air."

"Well, where is he to go, then?" asked Burton.
"What do you think, Bennie?"

"I know!" Bennie jumped up and went to a cupboard, whence he brought a cardboard hat-box. "It is nurse's new hat; but she never puts it on 'cept on Sundays, and we must get him out then."

"What about fresh air?" persisted Bob.

But that could be managed. Cardboard is easily pierced; and a tin soldier's bayonet would prove strong enough, if used with care.

"What shall we do with the hat?" asked Bob.

Now the hat in question was a beauty. It was large, and the whole of the crown and the brim were covered with red roses and green leaves.

"Let's put him on the top—he won't hurt it—and

he'll think he's in a garden with all those lovely flowers," suggested Burton.

Splendid idea! Now, surely, Clarence would be happy. He was kissed by all three, and laid down carefully. A small saucer of bread and milk was slipped in, in case he should be hungry in the night, and, well satisfied with their arrangements, the bees retired.

For forty-eight hours was the secret kept.

Then came the tragedy.

Nurse had left the room, and, as usual, there was a rush for the hat-box, and Clarence was lifted out to have a run. So absorbed were all in their play that no one heard approaching footsteps till the door actually opened, admitting both nurse and Fanny. The bees grabbed at the rat, but in their excitement all missed, and Clarence glided out into full view.

The result was electrical.

With one bound Fanny was on the top of the table, holding her skirts tightly round her feet, and shrieking at the top of her voice. More courageous, nurse dropped a dustpan with a clatter, and, raising the long brush she was carrying, aimed a blow at the little white figure which, had it taken effect, would have settled poor Clarence forever.

Then followed a wild scene.

Frightened and bewildered, Clarence raced from place to place, under furniture, out again, round this article and over that, and in pursuit ran nurse, ever aiming blows, and the bees.

"Don't hurt him, nurse! Don't hurt him!" they shouted. "He's ours! He won't do anything to you! Don't hurt him!"

But nurse still hit, and Fanny still shrieked; and the cause of all this excitement vainly sought safety, with his poor little heart beating fast, and his pink eyes bright with terror.

"Nurse, please, please!" implored the bees. "We'll catch him. Oh, don't! You nearly hit him there. Clarence, come here, come here!"

And then—how it happened no one quite knew—the rat was suddenly seen on the window-sill. The window was open to let in the soft air, and the bars in front prevented all danger of small boys falling out. But they were no hindrance to a white rat. Down came nurse's brush again, not on the poor creature, but close by. For a moment it hesitated which way to spring for safety, and that moment was fatal. Forward swept the brush, there was a faint squeak, and Clarence had disappeared.

There was a pause.

Then the characters of the bees showed curiously.

As a soldier, Burton's first thought was of vengeance. With a cry he flung himself on nurse, striking and kicking with all his strength. So fierce and unexpected was the onslaught that for a few moments she had actually all she could do to protect herself.

Bennie dropped on the floor, choking with horrified sobs. There was no idea of vengeance in his mind. What was the good? It would n't bring Clarence back again, thought the child, shaking with grief.

But Bob was neither for vengeance nor tears. As a doctor, his first care was for the injured. Tearing open the door, he rushed out. How he got down-stairs he never knew. A startled footman, about to close the front door after a visitor, paused in amazement.

"What is it, Master Bee?" he inquired.

Few people ventured on a Christian name. If they said "Burton," it was just as likely to be Bob, and quite as possible to be Bennie. So "Bee" suited any one.

Bob took no notice. In fact, he did not hear. Heart and soul were absorbed in getting to the poor little creature which was most likely lying broken and bleeding under the nursery window. But when he got there, there was no sign. Looking round, he spied a large mangy dog, with something white in its mouth, making its way out of the garden. Instantly he followed in pursuit. The dog quickened its pace with an angry snarl, and ran down the street, but the next minute the child was upon him. No thought of personal danger had Bob. His eyes were fixed on the rat, with its ruffled fur, its glazing eyes, and long, drooping tail. In his place Burton would have snatched at Clarence and pulled; Bennie would have thumped the abductor with all his force; but Bob's idea was the rat, and how to get it away with the least damage to itself. The small, strong hands went instantly to the dog's mouth. The animal struggled, snarled, and scratched, but could not escape. Bob had his fingers between the teeth now, and was striving to force them open. Finding that impossible, he thrust one hand farther and farther in to prevent more pressure on Clarence, and with the other tore at the upper lip. The pain proved too much, and with a savage growl the dog dropped his prey and turned on his assailant. Fortunate it was for Bob then that the astonished footman had followed, and arrived on the spot in time to plant a well-directed kick which sent

the creature yelping down the road. But Bob knew nothing of it. The second the rat fell, he had let go and snatched at his pet. Holding it carefully in both hands, he made for home as fast as he could, mounted the stairs, and presented himself once more in the nursery.

Things were different from when he had left. Burton and Bennie were sitting on chairs, one crying with rage and the other with grief, while nurse and Fanny were talking angrily to each other.

As Bob entered there was a universal outcry.

Fanny shrieked, and mounted the table again. Burton and Bennie jumped down, shouting, "Is he alive, Bob? Is he safe?" While nurse said: "You naughty, naughty boy! Throw the nasty thing away at once!"

Bob put it on the window-seat, smoothing the fur and trying to open the closed eyes.

As nurse advanced, Burton once more hurled himself upon her. "You shan't touch him!" he shouted. "Bennie, help me to keep her off! Let Bob look at him! Bennie!"

But there was no need to cry for Bennie. Though vengeance was not in his line, when there was anything to do he was ready to do it, and more effectually than impetuous Burton. So when nurse managed to catch hold of her little assailant, and turned again to fulfil her design of flinging the rat out of the window, she found Bennie standing between herself and Bob with a small whip in his hand—a child's whip only, but capable of giving a nasty blow.

Bennie's face was white, but determined, as he clutched the handle. "If you come a bit nearer I'll strike!" he whispered.

But nurse was not to be restrained. Of the three, Bennie was the gentlest, and she did not believe that he would dare. But she reckoned without her host.

As she made a step forward, up went the whip, and came down with all the strength of a sturdy young arm on her shoulder.

She uttered a cry of pain and anger, but paused.

"I'll do it again! I'll do it again!" threatened Bennie, shaking, but resolute.

And nurse actually quailed before the blazing eyes. Bob was still absorbed with his patient, Burton had seized the opportunity to free himself, and was ready to assault again if necessary, and Bennie stood with the whip uplifted.

It was rebellion—rank rebellion, and nurse admitted herself, for the first time, unable to cope with it.

"Straight to your father I shall go this minute," she said, and left the room, followed by the terrified Fanny.

"He's dead, bees! He's quite, quite dead!" whispered Bob, his voice breaking.

It needed no assurance for any of them. What life could remain in that mangled and torn body?

"What must we do?" asked Burton. "Nurse has gone for father. We have n't much time."

"She'll throw him on the dust-heap!" whispered Bennie, in horror. "Like she does the dear little mice in the trap."

All three considered. Whatever happened, their murdered pet should not suffer this last indignity.

"We'll bury him in the garden," said Burton. "Come along at once, before any one finds out."

"Let's roll him up in the hat," said Bennie. "It's soft and flowery, and we have n't any real smelly flowers. She will be angry, but it can't be helped. He shan't be thrown away like a common trap mouse."

Anything that had to be done must be done quickly. They collected all necessities, and with Clarence laid in the hat, and the largest part of the roses torn off and sprinkled over him, they crept down-stairs, and out into the little slip of ground which was designated a garden. The spades from the seaside were brought into use. They worked hard, and in silence. Every now and then the ground disappeared from view in a haze of tears. At last the hole was large enough. There were no long good-byes. One loving look and choking word of farewell, and the strange coffin was laid in the ground, the earth shovelled over, patted down, and made to look like the rest of the bed.

Then they slipped back as quietly as they had come, and, now that they had time to indulge their grief, crept closely together and cried bitterly.

"I can't b'lieve he's dead!" sobbed Bennie. "It's such a little, little while since he was here, eating out of our hands. Nurse is a wicked, cruel woman."

"She'll come to a bad end," said Bob.

"Them as are born to be hanged 'll never be drowned," added Burton.

The two last threats were often held over them, and, without grasping the meaning, they felt that something unpleasant was intended, and it was a comfort to hope that it would happen to nurse.

"We'll never see him again," said Bennie.

And the tears still flowed.

But even now they were to be allowed no peace.

Nurse entered. "I don't wonder you are crying, you naughty, wicked boys! Come down to your father at once!"

"We're not crying 'cause of you!" said Burton, angrily.

Their hearts beat fast as they entered the room, and found both father and mother there. The tale had been told beforehand. They were not there to be asked their version, but to receive punishment.

Nurse followed, carrying the hat-box. "And look at the state in which my hat is, ma'am. To think of a filthy, dirty rat living in it, for no one knows how long!"

An injury to clothes always received sympathy from Mrs. Burnham.

"Disgusting!" she said. "Really, Grant, you must punish the bees severely."

Nurse opened the box, and looked in with amazement. "Why, it's gone!"

But if the hat had gone, something else had not. A full-grown rat cannot live in a box for a couple of days without leaving evidence of its presence.

Mrs. Burnham raised a scented handkerchief to her face, and said "Disgusting!" again, with even more energy. "Do take it away!"

"Where can it be?" asked nurse, in amazement.

No one made any reply.

"Where is it, bees?" asked Mrs. Burnham, sharply.

"Buried, with Clarence inside it," said Burton, with outward bravery and inward shrinking.

Mr. Burnham picked up a cane.

"Come here, Bob!"

Bennie stepped forward. It was a rule with the bees

that punishments, as well as pleasures, were taken strictly in turn. With nurse this could not always be done, but father and mother very often did not discover the fraud.

So Bennie held out his hand and received three cuts, which made him wince.

"Burton!"

Bob held out his hand. "I shall give you an extra stroke for daring to hit nurse."

"And now, Bennie—the same for you."

Burton and Bob received it in equal silence.

"Now go; and if ever I hear of such conduct again——"

The sentence was not finished, but there was no need.

Once arrived in the nursery, nurse gave them a shake each on her own account, and then uttered a threat which they had never heard before.

"Just wait till your Auntie Bell gets hold of you! That's all!"

CHAPTER IV

THE BEES ESCAPE

THE bees sat in a ring on the floor, their knees touching each other's, their faces bent forward, eager and anxious.

Since the day of nurse's first uttering that mysterious threat, it had been repeated in every possible form. "See what your Auntie Bell will say!" "I would n't be in your shoes when your Auntie Bell catches you!" "Your Auntie Bell will stand no nonsense, I can tell you!" "You 'll wish you had been better to poor nurse when your Auntie Bell's got you!"

And, after all, what was Auntie Bell?

At first the bees maintained a dignified silence, and hoped that time would bring explanations. But at length, when, so far from ceasing, there began to be almost hourly allusions, Burton plucked up his courage.

"Father and mother won't let her," he said, with, however, very little certainty in his voice, for father and mother never interfered.

"Won't they!" responded nurse, spitefully. She had never forgiven the destruction of her best hat. "Won't they! They won't know anything about it. They have had enough of your naughtiness, and are

going far over the sea to get away from you, and you are to live with your Auntie Bell. And I wish you joy of it!"

The bees' hearts sank like lead. Father and mother going to desert them! Going to leave them to the tender mercies of an Auntie Bell—and an Auntie Bell who would do—what? The very vagueness of their ideas added to their dread.

"You 'll be there, nurse, and if we're very, very good p'r'aps you won't let her," suggested Bennie, piteously.

Nurse tossed her head. "No, I shan't! I'm to take you there by train, and then leave you."

The bees were stunned. All their little lives were turned upside down. What were they to do? No father, no mother, no nurse, not even home—they were to go in a train.

Burton ventured one more question. "What is a Auntie Bell?"

Nurse tossed her head again. "She's an old maid! That's what she is!"

The bees had never heard of such a creature before, and their appalled looks ought to have melted nurse's heart. But nurse's heart had no intention of melting. Her master's and mistress's plans had resulted in the loss of a very easy and well-paid situation, and as she could n't show her anger to them, and was bound to wreak it on some one, the children came in handily, and she took a vicious pleasure in the fear which the little fellows could scarcely conceal.

Meeting Henry, a good-natured footman, on the stairs, Burton questioned him. "What is a old maid, Henry?"

The answer was vague, but not reassuring. "You keep clear of 'em, Master Bee. Once I took service under one, but never again! no, never again!"

"What did she do?"

"What did n't she do, Master Bee! That's the question! What did n't she do?"

One hope still remained. Nurse by no means always spoke the truth. Suppose—suppose she was only trying to frighten them. They decided to appeal to the highest authority. Seizing an opportunity when mother was paying a visit—she did n't often pay visits now, there was such a lot to do—Burton asked, "Is Auntie Bell a old maid, mother?"

Mother broke into pretty tinkling laughter, and in it was the faint malice with which a young married woman so often regards her unmarried senior of a year or two. "Yes, I certainly think she may be called so now, I certainly do! Poor dear Bell! But what put the idea into your little heads?"

The last hope failed. They were reduced to wholesale capitulation, and even a giving up of their most cherished plans. Bennie was the one put forward. Bennie had more coaxing powers than the other two, though it is not easy to coax when one dare not lean against a knee for fear of crumples, or clasp an arm for the same reason, or even dare not stroke a hand for fear of an impatient "Dear me, child! It is remarkable how sticky you always are!" But he did his best. Standing at a little distance, so that beautiful mother need not fear for her silks and laces, he pleaded:

"Mother, dear, if we are very good, and promise never, never to go on the lake again, 'less nurse lets

us, and try our very, very best never to be naughty, need we go to Auntie Bell?"

"Oh, mother!" implored the other two.

But mother ignored their pleading faces. "Don't be ridiculous, children! Of course you must go! What else can I do with you?"

"Mother, we'll be ever so good; truly and really we will," whispered Bennie.

Mother gave a careless laugh. "I dare say you will. Your Auntie Bell will see to that. No, don't touch me, bees. Good-night."

She pressed a light kiss on each, and floated away, leaving despair behind.

And so the bees sat on the nursery floor, and discussed ways and means. Help from others there was none. They must work for themselves. But what could be done, save endure? "Despair gives courage oft to men," and out of the very hopelessness of the case they came to a mighty resolution.

Burton voiced it. "We won't go there!"

"What shall we do then?"

"Run away."

No sooner were the words spoken than they felt that the difficulty was solved. Of course! What else was left? They would run away.

"Where to?" asked Bob.

"Injia's coral strand. We intended going when we were grown up, so we'll go now."

"We don't know any one there," said Bennie thoughtfully.

"We don't know any one anywhere," said Burton.

A wave of desolation swept over the little hearts.

"There's the boy who gave Clarence to us; he was

nice and kind," said Burton, suddenly. "We might go to him if we don't like Injia's coral strand. Australia, he said. Which is the way, Bennie?"

"Keep straight on after getting to Injia's coral strand till we come opposite, and then turn to the right and walk down the map."

Nothing could be plainer.

"We ought to have some money, though, to buy things to eat."

"We 'll go to the bank and get it," said Bennie.

So it was decided. But time passed on, and no opportunity came till the bees were almost in despair, and began to think that they would have to begin their adventures without money. But the very day before they were to start their chance came. Nurse was busy, and so had told Fanny to take them for a walk. Fanny was always more easily dodged than nurse, and, as it happened, very little skill was required as she went to a shop exactly opposite the big building on which "Bank" was written.

Most fortunately the lady behind the counter was a friend of Fanny's, and the bees seized the moment when they were absorbed in conversation to steal out and run across the road. It was hard work to push open the heavy door on which was written the puzzling words "TUO YAW," but the combination did it. The bees were good at combination.

It chanced that at the time of their entry the place was empty, save for several gentlemen at the other side of the counter. The bees selected their man, and made their way to him. The fact that every one left his work to look at them did not disconcert them in the least. They were used to

the attention of the public. Burton, 'as usual, was the spokesman.

"Please, we want our money," he said politely.

The gentleman leaned over. So did every man in the room.

"What money?"

"The money which the bank is taking care of for us."

"Where is your book?"

"We don't want a book," said Burton, puzzled.

"We want money."

The gentleman laughed. "How much do you want?"

"All of it, please."

He looked very grave. "Do you mean you want to close your account with us? I hope you have no doubts as to the stability of the bank?"

The bees glanced at one another, quite aware that they were being laughed at, but not understanding the reason.

"Won't you, please, give it to us?" Burton begged.

"What do you want to do with it?"

The trio looked reproachfully at him. "It's *our* money," said Bob.

"Quite right, sonny!" nodded another. "Don't stand any impertinent questions!"

At this point the door opened, and another gentleman came in. All the clerks immediately hurried to their places, looking rather foolish.

The new-comer frowned. "What does this mean?" he asked sharply. Then his eyes fell on the children. "Why, it's the Burnhams' bees!" he ejaculated. "What do you want, laddies?"

With a sigh of relief they explained.

The gentleman nodded. "You want your money? Where is your book?"

"We are not going to buy books, sir," said Burton. "We want it for something else."

Their friend smiled at them—he was a most intelligent person—and without asking more questions went away for a minute, and then returned with a shovel full of cash. "There now!" he said. "Let's divide it fairly."

The bees were crimson with excitement as a silver threepenny bit and six pennies fell to each man's share. They had never dreamed of such riches. So elated were they that had it not been that their kind friend accompanied them to the door and watched while they crossed the road and met Fanny coming out of the shop, they would probably have started off on their adventures at once. As it was, the opportunity was lost.

That evening, when they were fast asleep, mother came up-stairs and had a chat with nurse. When she had finished, she went into the night nursery, and looked at them for a moment.

"Shall I wake them to say 'good-bye,' ma'am?" inquired nurse.

Mrs. Burnham shook her head. "Certainly not! What would be the good! I can't bear a scene! Well, good-bye, nurse," and she left the room.

Nurse's face darkened as she shrugged her shoulders. "Never a word as to what I am to do after all these years! It's not much sympathy some mistresses give!"

"What can you expect?" asked Fanny. "A lady

who does n't bother with her children is n't likely to bother with her servants. I don't envy Master Bees their mother in spite of her money and her lovely face."

The next morning the children came to a decision. They would risk all, and again appeal to mother. Perhaps if they said, "What a lovely frock, mother dear, and how pretty you look, in it!"—mother always liked to be admired—she would listen to their pleadings, and let them stay at home with nurse.

But this idea was quickly crushed. "Then you can't have your mother!" snapped nurse, in answer to an inquiry. "She's gone!"

Gone! Three small hearts sank like lead. Really gone!

"Without saying 'good-bye'?" asked Bennie, pitifully.

"Is it 'cause we were so naughty about Clarence?" asked Burton.

Nurse had carefully instilled the fact that it was all owing to their wickedness in the matter of the rat that their parents had decided they would no longer put up with them, but were going away, and leaving them to the tender mercies of Auntie Bell—old maid.

"Does n't she love us one little bit?" asked Burton, with his chest heaving.

"How can she love such naughty, wicked boys?" asked nurse, thinking it a good opportunity to drive the wedge home.

"I wish she'd kissed us just once for 'good-bye,'" sobbed Bennie, breaking down.

"It would n't have taken long," added Burton, try.

ing not to cry. "And we would have been careful not to crush her dress."

Bob said nothing. He did not particularly care for kisses that were not intended for him alone. He was more dismayed at the loss of the opportunity to appeal for help than that of any farewell caress.

Dressing for the journey took up their thoughts for a while, and then they kept a look-out for a chance of escape. Now that mother had deserted them they were more than ever determined not to be delivered over to Auntie Bell.

But nurse might almost have suspected their intentions, so close a watch did she and Fanny keep on them. The fact was that she knew the interest which the bees felt in all things in the slightest degree strange, and was well aware that the station would prove quite too absorbing for them to keep her in view

"Hold on to Master Burton, Fanny," she commanded. "Thank goodness, they all stick together!"

So Burton was held tightly, and his brothers, fastened by an invisible string, tailed after their accepted leader.

Nurse banged each one on the seat in the train with the exhortation, "Sit still, and be good, if you possibly can!"

So often had this command been given that, not unnaturally, the bees had come to the conclusion that they could not, and therefore neglected to try.

They immediately slipped down, and scrambled to the window farthest away from her. The toils seemed closing round them. What hope of escape now? Also, to their dismay, the train started "up the map,"

so every yard would have to be retraced on their way to Injia's coral strand, even if they managed to get free.

At first each stop made their hearts leap into their mouths as they asked, "Are we there?" But finding that nurse only grew cross, and really it was very interesting looking out of the window and seeing the fields, woods, and rivers rush past, they put the future from them and determined to enjoy the last happy day of their lives.

On and on they travelled, hour after hour. The bees grew tired and hungry, the landscape failed any longer to attract, and even the train seemed against them, for distinctly they heard the wheels repeating, "Wait till Auntie Bell—catches you.—Wait till Auntie Bell—catches you."

At last nurse closed her book, and began to tidy herself. Had the time come? Three scared little faces were turned towards her.

"The next station but one," she said. "We wait here for a few minutes, and I am going to step out and speak to my cousin. Sit still. If you move one inch I'll tell your Auntie Bell! She is to meet us."

Little as they loved her, nurse was yet the last connecting link to their old life, and to her they clung despairingly. For the first time in his life Burton ventured to climb on the seat, and put his arm round that highly respectable and most superior person's neck. "Oh, nurse! you won't let her! We'll be so good! Say you won't let her!"

Of what they were afraid they could hardly have told. The threats had been vague, and their terror was equally vague—perhaps all the greater for that

reason. Burton's embrace was not well received. He had crumpled her collar, and nurse was angry. Giving her favourite shake she thumped him down on the seat, and, as the train stopped, got out, and went for a few minutes' chat to her cousin, a waitress in the refreshment-room.

The bees crept closely to each other. Their fate was upon them. All hope was gone.

And then at the eleventh hour help came.

The train began to move.

With a frightened cry they scrambled to the window and looked out. There was no sign of nurse, and they glided out of the station just as a shrieking woman rushed on to the platform.

The bees, pale with horror, looked at one another. They would have to meet Auntie Bell without even nurse to protect them. And then, in a flash, they realised their opportunity.

"We won't get out at the next station. We'll go on," whispered Burton.

"Auntie Bell will know us. Everybody knows us," argued Bennie, feeling that there were disadvantages, as well as advantages, in being a triplet.

"She won't if we get under the seat."

The plan was worthy of the military genius who proposed it. Next minute there was no sign of any small boy in that compartment.

Already they were slackening speed. They stopped. There was the usual shouting and slamming of doors. Three little hearts beat furiously lest Auntie Bell should seize them, and drag them away to unimaginable torture. There was a long whistle, and they were off.

The dusty, dishevelled figures crept out, and then, overcome with past fear, present loneliness, and wearied with their long journey and many changes, the bees cried themselves to sleep in a huddled group.

They were aroused by an astonished voice: "'Ullo, 'ere's a start!"

The train had come to a stop in a quiet country place, and an amazed porter was staring at the travellers.

"What is it, Joe?" questioned another voice.

The bees were lifted out, and placed on the platform, where they became the centre of a small group of railway officials.

"Where do you come from?" asked the astonished man.

"Home," said Burton.

"Where are you going?"

"Injia's coral strand."

The men looked at one another inquiringly.

"Never 'eard o' the place," said one.

"Not on our line," added another.

"Where are your tickets?"

"Nurse has them."

"Where is nurse?"

"Gone away and left us."

Not for a moment did they doubt but that they had been wilfully deserted.

"What on earth 's to be done wi' 'em?" questioned the porter.

"You found 'em, Joe. They 're your property," laughed one.

The idea took with the group. "Yes, yes, they 're yours," they said.

"I don't want 'em!" growled Joe.

"Folks 'll look for 'em fast enough," said another. "But some one 'll ha' to tak' care on 'em for the night."

"I can't!" protested Joe. "Some o' you married men might."

"Not a bit o' 't! We married men ha' little 'uns o' our own; besides, a missus 'ud be none too well pleased if 'er man took 'ome three kiddies. A chap 'as to consider 'is missus, eh, mates?"

The group agreed. The bees waited patiently. Some one would look after them, they supposed; but they were so hungry, and so tired, and so—so lonely. Night coming on, and no food, and no bed, had not entered into their calculations when they decided on running away. They did not need nurse's sharp voice to make them "catch hands."

"Come on, little 'uns," said Joe. "You look main tired."

And he moved away, followed by the bees, and all his mates. Once outside women were added to the men, and soon a very respectable concourse conducted them to their destination. The women exclaimed and admired, but no one offered to take charge of them. Every man, woman, and child whom they met joined the throng.

"What's up?" demanded a fresh voice, as a tall handsome girl met the crowd. Then, catching sight of the bees, she fell in love at once, after the manner of all the sex. "What dears! Whose are they?"

A dozen voices explained. "They 're lost, Maggie. They 've come alone on the train. Joe found 'em."

The bees took matters into their own hands.

one seemed to want them, and Maggie looked nice and kind. Burton slipped a coaxing hand into hers.

"We 'll go with you, Maggie," he whispered. "You 'll take us, won't you?"

Was there ever a woman who could resist the military! Maggie dropped on her knees, and put an arm round the little fellow. "You darling! But what can I do?" she appealed to the crowd. "My man 's out o' work yet, an'——"

She stopped. Bennie's velvety cheek was against her fingers, and Bob was saying, "Maggie! Oh, Maggie!"

"Look 'ere," said Joe. "I 'm willing, and I 've no doubt the neighbours 'ull be willing to 'elp for their keep. So you just tak' charge on 'em, Maggie, and not a penny shall it cost you."

Maggie flushed crimson as Joe's hat was filled with coppers, for the villagers were good-natured, and felt rather proud of their distinguished visitors. "If my man were in work I 'd not tak' a farthing," she protested. "Come along, lovies."

And with Burton in her arms, and Bob and Bennie clinging to her dress and stumbling from weariness, she turned away to her cottage.

CHAPTER V

AUNTIE BELL—OLD MAID

THE next day the bees had a glorious time. Maggie was busy, but they were allowed to run free in the garden and an adjoining field. The whole feminine portion of the village visited them, and the three, who had early understood that the slightest breach of good manners in company would be followed by punishment, won golden opinions.

After a brief discussion, they had made up their minds that Injia's coral strand would probably remain where it was, and that they were rather too small to venture there at present. No; they would give up the idea of wandering, would settle down with Maggie, and lead a bucolic existence.

But their plans were upset. They were swinging on the garden gate, when they caught sight of a lady walking up the road. She was not a villager, that was evident. But then neither was she like beautiful mother, with her frills and flounces and gauzes which made her such a picture. No; this lady was well dressed, nicely dressed, but there was no superfluous prettiness about her neat but plain garments. And she carried an umbrella and a small basket. She was rather tall, and her face was pale and grave, with a

quiet, sad expression which seemed to say that there was little pleasure left in life, and that she had given up the hope of expecting much. She came along the road, glancing from side to side as if uncertain of her way. At last her eyes fell on the observant three.

She came towards them. "Are you the bees?"

"Yes," they assented.

"I am your Auntie Bell"

It was pitiful to see the rosy colour fade from the three little faces, as the three little hearts gave wild leaps, and the three little mouths grew parched and dry. A child is so helpless in its terror!

"Which is which?"

The bees were used to this inquiry, and answered in turn. After which they performed a kind of Family Coach which usually left strangers as wise as they were before as to their identity. There was a pause. Then Burton spoke with the courage of desperation. As a soldier, he must not fear. Never would it do for him to show the white feather! Moistening his dry lips, he said bravely:

"We are not going with you."

Auntie Bell did not fall on him and smite him to the earth. She only looked rather surprised. "Why not, Burton?"

In the midst of their fright, it came to them, with a shock, that she had fitted the right name to the right boy. Mechanically they performed their Family Coach again, and Burton resumed:

"We are going to stay with Maggie. She will be kind to us."

"And do you think I shall not?"

Bennie took up the running. "Nurse will be sorry for us when you get your claws into our wool."

Auntie Bell flushed crimson, but still the bees were neither shaken nor thumped. "Who told you so?"

"Nurse did."

"And does nurse always speak the truth?"

Ah! there was the rub! Auntie Bell had put her finger on the weak spot with a vengeance.

The enemy still delaying the onslaught, the bees grew braver.

"We're not coming, bees, are we?" said Burton. "We are going to stay with Maggie. We know what you are."

"What am I?"

Burton looked appealingly at the others to back him up. With one voice they answered:

"A old maid."

Again Auntie Bell grew crimson. Then the colour died away, and left her very pale—paler than before.

"Do you know what an old maid is?"

They shook their heads. That it was something appalling they knew, but no amount of questioning had brought a definite answer.

"Then I will tell you. An old maid is a lady who is so unfortunate as to have no little boys of her own to love her—and no big boy, either, for the matter of that";—but this last remark was uttered in a half-whisper, and scarcely seemed intended for any one's ears;—"and so some foolish and ignorant people think that she will be unkind to other people's little boys if she has the chance. That is all."

Without another word she moved away, and walking up the path, knocked at the door.

Left alone, they stared at one another in silence. Still without speaking, Burton and Bennie mounted two large stones, one on each side of the path, which had served them as horses during the morning, while Bob climbed the gate, and sat astride of the topmost bar. A long, long time passed. Except for an occasional "Gee up!" from Burton or Bennie as they drove their spurs into their steeds, and which was uttered in tones which showed their thoughts were far away, not a sound was heard.

At last the door opened again, and Auntie Bell and Maggie came down the path. Auntie Bell still looked grave and pale, but Maggie was smiling.

The bees did not move, but fixed their blue eyes unwinkingly on the foe, and awaited results.

Auntie Bell looked from one to another. "I don't know what to do if you will not come with me. When I started out this morning in the train—I hate going in a train alone"—the bees nodded with a faint dawning of approval: A very laudable and proper sentiment indeed! Beautiful mother hated travelling! Really, quite a correct and womanly thing to say! Unconscious of the approbation with which her remark was received, she continued—"I thought when I returned I should have three bees to take care of me—to carry my umbrella and basket, and to help me in and out of the carriage. But now what shall I do? I am so disappointed. Nurse wanted to come for you, but I said 'No.' I would rather come myself. Won't you think it over, bees?"

They removed their eyes to the surrounding country, but could n't resist furtive peeps at each other and Auntie Bell.

She looked at them, and then, as it happened, met Bob's eyes. "Won't you alter your mind, and come with me, Bob?" she pleaded.

Once more a kind of electric shock passed through the bees.

She was right again.

Slowly and deliberately Bob climbed down from the gate, moved forward, took a quiet, firm hold of Auntie Bell's umbrella, put it over his shoulder after the manner of a gun, and ranged himself by her side.

The other two were staggered. Burton specially was bewildered. What, Bob! Bob! to throw off his allegiance, and to be the first to make a move! Bob to lead, when it was he—Burton—who was always the leader!

And then worse happened.

Auntie Bell grew rosy. "Won't you, Bennie?"

Equally silently Bennie dismounted from his horse, took charge of the basket, and stood on the other side.

The bees were ever unanimous. They might not approve, but the decision of one was the decision of all. Burton, too, dismounted, and took up a position in front.

"Thank you, Burton!" said Auntie Bell, softly. "Thank you, bees."

Five minutes later they had bidden an affectionate farewell to Maggie, had promised to come and see her again soon, and were walking towards the station, Bob still on the right, Bennie on the left, and Burton stalking ahead. No one spoke.

As they passed through the village the women ran to the doors, and the bees' hats were seldom on their heads.

At the station they bade a polite adieu to Joe. The

train came in, Bob offered a courteous hand to assist his lady to a seat, and they were off.

The bees heaved deep sighs.

"Burton," said Auntie Bell, and Burton started as though he had been caught doing something naughty, "Burton, do you mind taking charge of the tickets?"

Burton held out his hand, and again there was a gleam of approval. Really a most delicate notion on Auntie Bell's part. Bob had the umbrella, Bennie the basket, and he had a left-out-in-the-cold feeling.

"And, Bennie, if you look in that basket you will find some biscuits. I fancied we might like some on the way home."

A truly thoughtful idea.

"If you were to put them out on the newspaper you could see the ones which have sweets on them, and then they could be divided."

Could delicacy go farther?

Bennie sorted them out with scrupulous fairness into four heaps, and finding one biscuit over, placed it on Auntie Bell's portion, she being undoubtedly the oldest and biggest.

There were no hopes that he "had n't taken the best" for himself; no insulting insinuations as to "dirty hands"; not even an intended to be polite, but really embarrassing, suggestion that they had "better eat them all themselves"; the biscuits were accepted with thanks, and eaten with enjoyment.

The bees' serious little faces relaxed, and for the first time they ventured on an uncertain smile.

Conversation proved easier.

"So you said 'good-bye' to dear mother yesterday?"

The three answered in turn :

"Oh no! She went without saying 'good-bye.'"

"That was 'cause we had been naughty about Clarence."

"Mother does n't love us."

"It is n't her fault," added Burton, chivalrously.

"We are too naughty for any one to be able to love us."

Auntie flushed rosily again. The bees noted with still further approval that when she flushed rosily she looked a great deal nicer than when she did n't. Not like beautiful mother, of course!—that was too much to expect—but still, really quite nice.

"I don't believe it! Who said so?"

"Nurse. And it 's quite true, Auntie Bell."

But, nevertheless, they felt gratified.

"I don't believe it!" said Auntie Bell again. "But who is Clarence?"

And over the story of the ill-fated rat the ice was still further broken.

The journey was not long, and as they left the train Burton gave up his tickets with the air of a family man at least.

The house at which their cab stopped was a much more rambling affair than the one to which they had been accustomed. Instead of ringing the bell, auntie opened the door with a latch-key. "Now," she said, "would you rather go and see grandpa and grandma, or come and help me to make the tea?"

The bees elected to assist.

"Where are the servants?" asked Burton, missing the half-dozen or so he was accustomed to see.

"We keep only two, and both left last week, and I

have n't been able to find any more yet, so I have to do nearly all the work. I have been looking forward to you helping me. Who will make the toast?"

For the first time in their lives the bees found themselves useful, and the experience charmed them. They made the toast, and carried the tea-things, and cleaned the knives in a fascinating thing which had to have its handle turned. Not a single thing did they break, and not a lump of sugar did they remove from the basin, though they noted that Auntie Bell cast no suspicious glances in its direction.

To their surprise, they had their meal with their seniors. It was a great improvement on having it in the nursery, even though grandpa's stern voice rather alarmed them, and grandma fretfully said they must n't have jam because it would sticky their fingers.

They soon found that grandpa always sounded grim, and grandma always seemed on the verge of crying.

After tea they helped to clear away and wash up, and then had to sit in the drawing-room, and to try and answer a great many questions as to what father and mother were doing, of which they knew nothing.

"Shut the door, Bob!" grandpa commanded.

According to their usual habit, Burton jumped up and obeyed. As he went back to his seat he caught Auntie Bell's eyes, and suddenly the boy grew crimson.

Auntie Bell knew.

For a second he was dismayed; then she smiled at him. Instantly he smiled back, a smile full of good fellowship and coaxing.

Not only did she know, but she understood, and did n't intend to tell! The bees looked at her. For the

first time they noticed that she had blue eyes; and, gracious me! why had n't they seen it before! Her hair was red. And really—they had never thought of it—*she was a bee too!*

From that moment relations were established. No, one protested when grandma bade them go to bed. They chatted as they undressed.


"Oh, the sea! the sea!" shouted Burton, looking out of the window.

Auntie Bell shook her head. "Not the sea, bees. Only a big river. You must go down and paddle some day. When I get a maid, and have a little more time, we will have some picnics."

Auntie Bell went round to each, tucked him up, and kissed him "good-night." Bennie, to whom she attended first, was struck dumb with amazement. Never had he been kissed "good-night" before. But he received the attention politely, and then sat up with interest to see her do the same kind office to the others.

"Good-night, Bennie!" she whispered. "Good-night, Burton! Good-night, Bob!"

Bennie and Burton responded to the kiss with their usual readiness. But Bob lay silent. This was a kiss for himself—for his own self—not one which she didn't know whether she was n't giving it to Burton or to Bennie instead. Never in his life had he received a kiss that was all his own—was meant for him. Bob had always been the cold, unloving one. Not that father or mother knew, but nurse did, and nurse had often noted how he stood back and did not accept his share of the maternal caresses. "A bad, heartless boy!" had been her dictum, and Bob had, of course, believed her. But this was different. It was to him



that Auntie Bell had appealed first—and had appealed by name—it was he whom she was kissing now. Without a word he put out his arms and, clasping them round her neck, held her fast. He could n't have put into words what he felt—he did not understand—but in the depths of his heart he was vowing loyalty to the first person who had kissed him as Bob—not as one of the bees—it did n't matter which. And auntie, feeling the clinging clasp of the childish arms, and holding the little fellow closely, no longer felt envy of her beautiful sister-in-law, but only a kind of contemptuous compassion for the woman who had flung aside such affection, and left her little sons to say, "Mother does n't love us!"

They waited till her step on the stairs could no longer be heard, then rose up and stood erect on their beds. Burton poured out an imaginary bumper into an imaginary glass which he raised high above his head. "A toast, bees!"

They had not attended occasional dinner-parties, at which were gathered all sorts and conditions of men, for nothing.

His brothers followed his example.

"May father and mother stay away over the seas forever!"

It was drunk with gravity.

Now, it was a rule that when one gave a toast the others must follow suit. If they had nothing special to suggest on their own account, the first could be repeated, but one each there must be.

Again the glasses were filled.

Contrary to his usual custom, Bob was the second speaker.

"Auntie Bell! Gorblessor!"

What the last word might mean he had no idea. He had once heard it on an extra solemn occasion when the health of "The Queen" had been proposed by a very old, white-haired, bronzed-faced general, with a far-away, dreamy look in his eyes. Everybody had glanced silently at his neighbour, and then stood up and received it with acclamation.

"Auntie Bell! Gorblessor!" echoed Bennie.

"Auntie Bell! Gorblessor!" repeated Burton.

The glasses were held high, drained to the dregs, and smashed down upon the floor, that no lesser toast might sully their honour.

The bees dropped into bed, and slept the sleep of comparative innocence.

CHAPTER VI

THE BEES MAKE THEMSELVES USEFUL

THE next day was Sunday. The bees opened their career with crime. It was unfortunate, but the temptation was too great. When they woke, the sun was shining, the birds singing, the trees rustling, and everything seemed to be calling three small boys to rise and explore their new home. But to get up before nurse called them was a sin only to be expiated in many shakings and hard slaps, so they resisted and lay still. A long, long time passed. Probably a whole five minutes. Then Burton slipped out of bed, and began dressing. The other two drew their breath hard, but followed the lead of the arch criminal. It was in the aggravating nature of things that almost immediately Auntie Bell was heard outside. The little sinners hustled on as many clothes as possible. Long experience had taught them that the more there is on the less painful smacks are likely to prove. But they were dismayed faces that were turned to the opening door.

Auntie smiled upon them. "Getting up? That's right! Shall I fasten those buttons, Burton?"

The amazed bees accepted her assistance in silence.

A child's outlook on life is a very puzzled one. Of right and wrong he has very little idea. Right and

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wrong to him are the things which the seniors around praise or blame. Therefore when, for any reason, he leaves one home for another, and finds that what was formerly right is now wrong, and *vice versa*, he is absolutely bewildered, and his whole moral standard turned upside down. And the helpless little being is punished when he intends to be good, and caressed when he is under the impression that he has been naughty, until experience has taught him the new code, and he gradually adapts himself to the fresh surroundings.

And so, as the day wore on, the bees found themselves in a maze of bewilderment. Getting tired of playing alone in the dining-room, they decided to seek Auntie Bell. Now, to leave the nursery and look for nurse was a sin before which even early rising paled. But when three little faces peeped into the kitchen, where auntie was preparing dinner, they were greeted with an encouraging "Have you come to help me? That is very kind."

They swallowed their amazement, and began to reflect that this was a house in which one could not be naughty. Naturally they soon got into difficulties. After dinner auntie retired to dress, and the children, left to their own resources, got out their bricks, and began a wonderful tower. Nurse always approved of bricks and quiet games. But, alas! they were no longer under nurse's jurisdiction, and grandpa, entering the room some time later, stood gazing in speechless wrath at the Sabbath-breakers.

Grandpa was a martinet in the matter of Sunday observances. Never in their lives had his children been permitted even a picture-book with which to

while away the long hours, and when he had a trifle recovered from the shock, he proceeded to threaten his astonished grandsons with all the rage of an offended heaven, and to point out the absolute certainty of their departure to hell. After which he flung the bricks to the ground, and, commanding the bees to sit on chairs and meditate on their sins, stormed out of the room.

Fortunately for their peace of mind they were accustomed to seeing nurse in rages, and took them as a matter of course. Grandpa's anger was certainly more alarming as they were less used to it, but they carelessly put it down to the usual "trantrum." As to his threat about hell, having never heard of such a place, they were comparatively indifferent. But what had they done wrong? They did not puzzle their heads much. They were used to being punished without rhyme or reason, so far as they knew, so passed a pleasant hour in "daring" each other to get off the chairs on which they had been placed, and walk farther and farther away from them, ready to rush back at the slightest sound of the approach of the enemy. As grandpa returned several times, and as each time the bees had managed to change chairs, and he never found it out, they enjoyed themselves exceedingly, and determined to play bricks another day.

In the evening auntie invited them to accompany her to church. With a determination to be really good they did not wait for the command to "catch hands," but linked on immediately, and glanced back to note the approving smile they expected. It did not come.

"Is n't any one going to walk with me?" she asked reproachfully.

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Though puzzled they were prompt. Burton reached one side, Bennie the other, and, finding himself the left-out one, Bob ranged himself by Bennie's side.

Any offer to carry anything for nurse had always been met with "Leave that alone, you bad boy! Can't you keep your fingers off things? You'll only drop it!" But, reflecting that the previous day auntie had herself suggested that they should wait on her, Bob, in some trepidation, proffered to carry the umbrella again. He was thanked with so charming a smile that his brothers were emboldened to ask for the prayer- and hymn-books.

The four walked along with gravity. The bees received the usual attention, which they bore with their accustomed careless ease and indifference—an ease which Auntie Bell admired, but could by no means emulate. She was crimson with embarrassment and pride at the admiring smiles, and, for the first time for many years, began to find a difficulty in disposing of her hands and feet gracefully.

She was positively relieved when Bob fulfilled nurse's prediction and let the umbrella fall. He picked it up again, pleading that it was n't broken, and awaiting the expected slap.

"Never mind, darling!" she said. "Accidents will happen, and you 'll be more careful in the future, won't you?"

The little fellow turned surprised, loving eyes towards her, while, in their determination not to offend so kind an auntie, Burton and Bennie clutched their books with a fervour which, had they been pieces of wet soap, would have shot them out yards ahead.

As they turned into the seat at church there was a

short, sharp scuffle as to who should sit by auntie. Bennie was the loser, and immediately his active brain began concocting plans by which his defeat could be turned into victory.

Auntie Bell had never been so embarrassed in her life. In their desire to be good the bees copied her every attitude and movement. This would not have mattered so much in an ordinary way, but in her agitation she did not seem able to keep the same position for two minutes together, and every change was faithfully imitated by her three admirers. She tried to keep her eyes rigidly before her, and the bees stared rigidly too, but one eye was ever on the alert as to whether she was not now clasping the right hand over the left, instead of the left over the right, or whether she was supporting her chin, or her brow, when kneeling. Auntie broke into a profuse perspiration, and yet she could not but love her unconscious little tormentors.

At length the sermon seemed to promise some peace. Now was Bennie's chance. Leaning forward he said, in an audible whisper, "I'm tired, Auntie Bell. Can I sit on your lap?"

His brothers looked at him in disgust. Really, Bennie was too absurd! It was perfectly courting a snub. They had been sorry for him when mother had been angry, but it was foolish to risk it again.

But Bennie had calculated well. Auntie grew rosy again, but she held out her arms, and next minute the little lad was leaning back against her, while she held him closely, with her cheek on his curly red head. Both his hands clutched hers, and at the clasp of the small fingers auntie's heart beat faster,

and a warm thrill ran through her. What childless woman does not know the feeling when little hands hold hers? Bennie endeavoured to look calm indifference straight ahead, and at the same time to smile triumph at his brothers. They, on their part, inly lamented that they, too, had not dared to put their fate to the touch. Auntie Bell was blazing, but this time it was with another feeling, and when a small firm hand clasped one arm, and a red head sank on one shoulder, while almost at the same moment another small firm hand clasped the other arm, and another red head sank on the other shoulder, she was reduced to hoping that her pride and satisfaction were not too obvious.

The preacher was one who, as a rule, was long-winded and uninteresting; but on the present occasion auntie only wished that the sermon had been double the length. What he was speaking about she had no idea, but her pretty bees nestled against her, and she had not so enjoyed a discourse for years.

As the people rose to their feet and the hymn was given out, there was another brief, unseemly scuffle for the book, but Bob was successful, and standing on the kneeling-board, proudly looked on with auntie. The hymn happened to be one they knew, and she subsided into silence as the three sweet, shrill voices rose lustily. Burton and Bennie shared a prayer-book which they held upside down. Not that they could not read. Of course they could! But there was only one hymn-book, and Bob had that. To sing without a book was no class; while to hold the prayer-book right side up was dangerous. They were apt to utter the words they saw, and not the right ones.

As the days passed on the bees and Auntie Bell grew closer and closer companions. They found her full of thoughtful ways. For instance, when washing their faces she considerably left their eyes to the last, and always gave fair warning before doing them, while in drying she attended to them first. When combing their hair she had a delicate way of holding that part which came between the head and the comb, which rendered knots a matter of comparative indifference, instead of a torture.

They confided in her their intentions as to their future lives, and she listened and sympathised, and was as particular as they could wish in addressing them as Sir Bennie, Dr. Bob, and Captain Burton, on occasions of importance. They even suggested that she should become a hospital nurse, and then they need not be parted, as Dr. Bob would certainly put his patients under her charge, and the Captain and Sir Bennie would see that their troops and workmen always went to Bob in case of illness or accident.

In fact they became almost inseparable; and from early morn till eve, where auntie was, there would her three satellites be. That early morning business was the result of an error on Auntie Bell's part. It occurred before absolute confidence was established. The bees had been playing in bed, and when turning a somersault Bob had overbalanced, and fallen on to the ground with such a crash that, in spite of gallant efforts, he was reduced to a few tears. Next moment a tall, pink-robed figure entered.

Crying at home had meant punishment; so Bob endeavoured to avert it.

"I 'm trying not to, I really am, auntie!" he sobbed.

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Auntie lifted him up, and carried him away to her own bed. There a few kisses and cuddles put him to rights, and in order to completely effect a cure she unwarily proffered a tale. The bees had never heard a tale in their lives, so Bob's acceptance, though polite, was indifferent.

She began little Red Riding Hood.

By the time the wolf appealed on the scene Bennie and Burton, hiding behind the door, to find out what she was going to do to Bob, were so fascinated that they crept in. Auntie only smiled, planted the little fellows at the bottom of the bed, with one shawl round the two of them, and continued. With breathless horror they listened to the fate of the unfortunate grandmother; with deep anxiety they heard of the artful wolf getting into the old lady's cap and gown, and preparing his wiles for little Red Riding Hood. They clenched their hands over the innocent inquiries, every one of which drew the little heroine closer and closer to her dreadful fate; and when at the critical moment the woodman appeared, and the child was saved, they drew gusty sighs of relief which could have been heard in the kitchen.

Yes, it was certainly unwary of Auntie Bell. From that time the bees clamoured for tales at every available moment—especially in the early morning. She was obliged to lay a command on them that she was not to be awakened before half-past six. They obeyed. But the second chime was still hanging in the air when they were climbing the bed.

They assisted in getting breakfast ready. They helped with the beds—auntie on one side, and the three bees on the other. They worked hard in the

house. The butcher and milkman, calling with their goods, were struck dumb by the sight of three red heads appearing behind auntie's skirts. Elderly gentlemen, calling at the front door, were conducted in a dazed condition to grandpa's study, by a secretly chuckling lady and three small identicals. Shopkeepers grew confused, when writing down their orders, by three heads appearing above the counter. They went to town with auntie, and helped to carry her parcels. They fed the hens and chickens, and looked for the eggs. They so bewildered the lady in the registry office, that she wrote down that what auntie wanted in the domestic line was three pretty little boys in dark serges and white collars. They were interested listeners at auntie's interviews with many maids, few of whom were suitable; they sympathised ardently with her annoyance when promising girls sent "back-word" at the last moment, and even outdid her in their expressions of indignation. And finally they assisted in engaging a servant on their own account.

It happened this way.

Auntie announced, "Bees, I must go out this afternoon."

"All right, auntie! We'll come with you," the devoted chorus responded.

"That's just the difficulty, darlings! You see, grandpa is out, too; and grandma has a cold, and ought not to go to the doors if any one comes. Do you think you could possibly look after the house for me while I am away?"

Much overcome by the proud responsibility, the bees assured her that they could—that they would be

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as good as gold, and attend to everything—and that the house should certainly be standing safely where it was on her return.

Auntie Bell looked worried. But there seemed to be nothing else to be done, so matters were finally arranged. The three hindered her dressing in every possible way, under the impression that they were helping, and escorted her in a body to the garden gate. There they received last directions:

“Keep the doors chained, bees. Don’t try to lock them, or you may not be able to unlock them again. Don’t go to grandma unless she rings for you. If any one calls for grandpa say that he is out and will not be back till tea-time.”

They promised everything.

“Now run back, dears, and let me see the door chained before I start. Good-bye! It is such a blessing to have bees whom I can trust!”

With this last bit of blarney ringing in their ears the three hurried in, chained the door, and thrusting their hands through the opening waved “good-bye.”

For some time they played quietly. Auntie need not have warned them not to trouble grandma; they never went near either of their grandparents, if they could help. Grandma’s incessant fretfulness and grandpa’s stern tones were not attractive.

At last came a knock at the door.

Of course they answered it together.

A bonny, rosy-cheeked, healthy-looking girl stood there.

The bees had seen so many maids, of so many descriptions lately, that they recognised the class at once.

"Have you come after the siterwation?" asked Burton, with dignity.

The girl looked dazed. One little boy she might have smiled at, two would have been amusing, but three—three exactly alike in every particular! She collapsed, and could only murmur, "Yes, please."

The bees hesitated. Here was a maid—a much-longed-for maid!—and a nice-looking one, too!—they approved of the honest, rosy face—and where was Auntie Bell?

Then they made up their minds. Had n't they assisted at interviews galore? Did n't they know, as well as auntie herself, what was required? They would see the girl themselves, and satisfy their minds as to her capabilities.

"Come in," said Burton, politely. "Auntie Bell is out, but we expect her in shortly."

The girl giggled, hesitated, and then followed them to the dining-room, and sat down on the chair which Bob offered, and which was the one on which maids always sat when Auntie Bell was questioning them. Then they planted themselves on three seats opposite. Their small legs did not reach the floor; but their gravity, their absolute assurance, and, above all, their strange likeness to each other fascinated the applicant. She gave a swift glance round, smiled, and answered their questions as demurely as though they had been auntie herself.

They spoke according as one or another remembered the formula.

"Which siterwation have you come after?" asked Burton.

"Housemaid, please.

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"Could you turn out a room and clean it? This room, frinstance?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about rising? I am most peticular about that. My mother is not strong, and I must have punkshality at breakfast. Do you think you could be down by a quarter to seven?"

The bees were speaking in the personality, and after the manner, of Auntie Bell, and were struggling gamely with her exact phrases.

The girl, more amused than ever, assured them that she was always accustomed to early rising, and was sure she could give satisfaction.

"'Bout washing?" said Bob. "I espect my cook to wash, but you would have to help. Can you wash and iron? Do you think you could manage my white skirts, and p'r'aps blouses?"

Bob's personality was still feminine, and the nearly-convulsed girl murmured that she thought she could.

"I always send out the large arkitles, such as sheets and table-cloths, and the gentleman's starshed things," said Bennie, with supreme ignorance as to what "starshed things" might be, but a parrot-like repetition of auntie's words.

"Can you cook?" asked Burton. "'Course as a gen'ral things you would not have that to do, but on washing days I espect my housemaid to send in a plain dinner—cold meat and potatoes, and milk pudding."

"I could do that." The girl spoke promptly. A situation in which were three such darlings began to have attractions, and she glanced out of the window in search of the absent mistress.

"What is your name?" asked Burton.

"Minnie Smith."

"And then, Minnie, another thing. Have you a—
a—er—friend, a young man, you know?" Bennie
could not blush, but his mimicry of Auntie Bell's
shy, sensitive manner when asking this necessary but
intrusive question was perfect.

The total unexpectedness of the query actually
brought the warm colour to the girl's cheeks.

"Of course," went on Bennie, without waiting for
a reply, "you can go out with him on your night out,
but until I know you I cannot allow him to come to
the house. And I *never* permit gossiping at the back
gate. No 'spectable girl would do it."

Minnie's handkerchief went suddenly to her mouth.
"Oh, no! I should n't think of it!" she protested in
strangled tones.

At this point Auntie Bell always relaxed, so, care-
fully imitative, the three smiled alluringly, and
Minnie's heart was won forever.

"Well, I think you will suit me very nicely. Do
you think you would care to come?" asked Burton.

"Oh yes, I should indeed!"

"Then I shall be pleased to have you. By the way,
have you plenty of clothes—black and print dresses,
aprons, caps, and changes of underinnen?"

Bob put the delicate inquiry point-blank, and with-
out the remotest understanding.

Minnie gasped astonishment, heaved convulsively,
and said she had.

At this moment the door opened. All four started
to their feet. Minnie gave a final gasp, straightened
her twitching features with difficulty, and dropped a

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demure curtesy. The bees gave a simultaneous rush.

"Auntie," said Burton, in a loud whisper, "her name's Minnie Smith, and we feel sure she 'll do."

And two or three days later as auntie sat down to a meal which she had not prepared herself, the joy of which only the harassed housekeeper knows, she thankfully echoed Burton's assurance that "Minnie would do."

CHAPTER VII

THE BEES ATTEND AN "AT HOME"

AUNTIE BELL had a friend—that is to say, if long acquaintance makes a friend. They had played together as little ones; later on they had attended the same school; and still later had gone to the same parties, picnics, and other places of amusement in their girlish days. But as time went on Mrs. Rouse had become much superior to her childhood's companion.

In the first place, she had married. And the immense superiority of the married woman over the unmarried, only the married woman knows—except the unmarried. To be sure Mr. Rouse had been sixty, and old at that; but at all events he had been a man, and had been able to bestow upon his wife the coveted title of Mrs.; and when, at the end of a year, he had considerably died, and left her a wealthy young widow, the latter felt that he had done everything that he could.

Again, in another point, Mrs. Rouse scored high above Bell. She had a child. And no one knows the terrible inferiority of the childless woman to the mother, save a mother—and a childless woman. Not that Bell had any liking for Egerton Rouse himself—no one had but his mother, who had early ruined him with her doting fondness—in fact, he was her special

horror; but still he was a child, and as such raised his mother to greater dignity.

There was a time when it seemed likely that Bell—she was n't "auntie" in those days—would have been the superior. For there was a certain Someone who admired her greatly, and when that Someone was present Bell's pink cheeks grew pinker, her blue eyes brighter, and she could not altogether avoid a shy consciousness. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Rouse—she was Lucy Gelder then—took a liking to Someone, and when Lucy wanted a thing as a rule she got it, or at all events saw that no one else did. And so she compassed him with sweet smiles and little attentions, and never lost the opportunity of a laughing innuendo or a gentle hint as to Bell's indifference. And Bell was far too proud to seek any man's attention. So small differences became magnified, and slight actions and words received a significance they did not deserve, and little estrangements arose. And Lucy was always so sympathetic. Perhaps she would not have found her task so easy if it had not been for the fact that Brian Coverdale was poor, and in those days Mr. Burnham was rich; and these two things made the young man sensitive, and quick to notice slights when Lucy, full of sympathy, pointed them out.

At last came the climax. It was rumoured that Brian had received an offer of a splendid appointment—but it meant absence from England for many years, and he must go almost immediately. Some of the pretty colour faded from Bell's cheeks, though she still laughed and chatted as brightly as usual.

Then one fine morning, the first day in April, when the birds were singing and the buds bursting, and all

was bright and hopeful for the coming summer, she received a letter. It was a straightforward, manly one, speaking of earnest affection, and asking if she could give her love in return. If she cared, even a little, he could delay his departure for a couple of weeks, but if not he should leave immediately by the next boat. Would she send the briefest message telling when he could see her? If he heard nothing he would understand, and would go at once.

And Bell had grown rosy and happy in her own little room, and had blushed deeply over a faint hint in the letter that he could return in a year or so, and take some one out with him to his South American home. And then she had written a shy little note to the effect that she should be at home that evening.

Running down-stairs with the answer in her hand, she found Lucy had called.

"Are you going out? I'll come with you," she said.

Bell would have preferred to go alone, but she had no excuse ready, so the two girls went together.

As they reached the pillar-box, Lucy, who was walking on that side, held out her hand. "Shall I post your letter?"

Again Bell had no excuse.

As Lucy took it she exclaimed: "Look! If there is n't Brian Coverdale! He goes to-morrow, I hear."

Involuntarily Bell glanced away for a moment.

"No, it is n't!" Lucy said, walking on. "I felt sure it was."

"Did you post my letter?" Bell faltered.

"Of course! Did n't you want it posted?"

That evening she sauntered out into the garden. It was beautifully mild, quite a change from the cold that

had ruled so long. At first she half dreaded every footstep that passed the gate—not that there were many of them, the house being some little way from the town—but dusk came, and he had not come. She went indoors and sat waiting and trembling, and trying to work quietly, while her mother fretted over one thing and another as usual. But the evening wore on, and no one came; and at last she put by her work and went to her room.

The days passed, and no sign nor explanation came. At first she was bewildered, then angry, and then a dull aching pain came, and would not be driven away.

At last, being a girl of common sense, it struck her that posts were not infallible, and it was just possible that her note had never been delivered. After that the daring notion struck her that she would write and ask plainly if this were so. There would be no need to hint at the contents—she might casually drop an inquiry. But the difficulty of making such a casual inquiry, and also of writing to him at all, was not to be solved immediately, and while still puzzling and hesitating Lucy again came to see her.

"I suppose, Lucy, there was no mistake about you posting my letter?" she asked suddenly.

Lucy laughed. "Was it important? You need not trouble. I did not try to make you an April Fool twice in one day."

"What do you mean?" Bell asked breathlessly.

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I don't suppose I took you in, but it struck me that it would be a good joke. I knew Brian Coverdale was rather taken with you, so I wrote you a letter purporting to come from him."

Bell grew very white. "You did n't, Lucy! You would never be so wicked!"

"What was the harm? I knew that you never cared for him. Why, Bell, did I take you in? You don't mean to say you thought it was really from him—and the first of April too!"

In her next answer Bell delivered herself over to years of torture.

"I answered it!" she said, with dry, stiff lips.

Lucy threw herself back and shrieked with laughter. "You did? What fun! But what a blessing you refused him! I wonder what on earth he thought!"

Bell made no reply. Matters were bad enough as they were; they would be ten times worse if Lucy knew that it had not been a refusal. She tried to take comfort from the fact that she had not spoken plainly in her note, that she had merely told him she would be at home. But what would he have thought of her? And she dare not even show her shame and anger. She must laugh it off as a practical joke—carried a little too far, certainly, but only a joke. Why had she never suspected? It was so exactly like Lucy's monkey tricks. Surely, after the many times she had suffered from them, she might have been on her guard!

Presently Lucy went away, still laughing and delighted. At the door she turned, and fired over her shoulder a Parthian shot. "It's really rather like the famous 'Miss Baxter, who refused a man before he axed her,' is n't it?"

As soon as she had gone Bell rushed to her room, and tore open the letter she knew by heart. It was dated March 31st, and she would receive it on that

fatal first of April. Next moment it was in fifty pieces. Afterwards doubts struck her. Surely, surely it was beyond Lucy's power to write like that! But in that case why had he not come? And what could he have thought! what could he have thought!

She never saw him again, and weeks passed into months, and months into years. Her elder brother, Grant, went away, became a clever artist, and married a wealthy lady. They were proud of him at home, but he had gone out of their lives. Her younger brother, Philip, also left home, became a regular ne'er-do-well, and was always in trouble. They were not proud of him at home, and when he did come into their lives no one wanted him. Mr. Burnham, always stern and cold, grew sterner and colder. Mrs. Burnham had been pretty, helpless and fretful when young, and when old the helplessness and fretfulness still remained, though the prettiness vanished. One unfailing subject for complaint was that her daughter had not married. It would have been such an interest for her! But Bell really did not feel that she could marry in order that her mother might work endless doilies and toilet sets for her house.

So life was rather grey, and as time went on her colour faded, and her eyes lost their brightness, and quiet patience took the place of the hope and spring of youth. Lucy Gelder married Mr. Rouse—who looked eighty when only sixty—and from that time took on little airs. She patronised her old associate when in good humour, and when in a bad one, and this happened frequently, made her inly writhe with malicious allusions to April Fool's day, or a certain Miss Baxter, who always cropped up in conversations at such times.

Then had come Grant's suggestion that she should take charge of the bees for a few months, while he and his wife went to the Continent; and Bell had agreed with secret pleasure. And they had come, and life was looking different. There was colour and brightness in it now. She had been shocked at the loveless lives the little fellows had led; but now she was reaping the results of her sister-in-law's indifference, and was revelling in the love she was winning so easily.

As for the bees, of course they did not see her side of the question. They only realised that auntie loved them, that to her they were not merely nuisances, or at best pretty toys to be shown to company—nay, they were not even only "the bees"! They were Bennie, Burton, and Bob, individually known, and individually loved; and with all their affectionate little hearts they responded.

A few days after the arrival of Minnie, Auntie Bell received an invitation. It was from an old friend whose weakness it was to be everlastingly discovering youthful genius, and insisting on exhibiting it to all and sundry, at At Homes got up for the occasion. People were rather bored, and the genius somehow always fizzled out; but the lady was lovable, her refreshments beyond all praise, and she made every one as comfortable as possible; so her friends laughed good-temperedly at her foible, and accepted her invitations. On the present occasion she wrote: "Bring the bees, Bell. Of course, under the circumstances, you cannot leave them at home, and they can play with Egerton Rouse in the garden during the music. Such talent, my dear! You positively must come! Such

delicacy of tone! such breadth of expression! and such wonderful lights and shades!"

There were a couple more pages of enthusiasm which Bell skipped. She was seized with an intense longing to go. It was not the embryo Paganini who attracted her. It was not even the opportunity of a change after her long, weary, servantless time of work. No! The temptation lay in those words, "They can play with Egerton Rouse." Lucy was to be there—Lucy and her boy. Egerton—who pouted and sulked, who turned a pettish shoulder when told to "shake hands with the lady, darling," by his doting mother—who said "Shan't!" when bidden to do things, and "Shall!" when bidden not—who spoke gruffly and rudely. Auntie Bell's whole mind was filled with the prospective delight of exhibiting her bonny, well-mannered bees in startling contrast to Lucy's cub. Oh! what bliss! what absolute bliss to see Lucy hot and angry! The worm had turned. The prospect was too alluring. Auntie wrote off a joyous acceptance. She felt young and happy again.

When the day came she selected from the bees' many dainty costumes, and arrayed them in blue velvet with deep lace collars. She washed their rosy faces till they shone, and brushed their curly red hair till it glittered like a golden halo.

They were quite accustomed to these elaborate preparations, and quite accustomed to At Homes. Their conduct while dressing was exemplary.

One good turn deserves another. Auntie had superintended their toilet, they would superintend hers. So they followed to her room, and looked on with interest.

Auntie Bell was a modest woman, and blushed under their close scrutiny.

As she laid her dress on the bed, Burton's expression became one of marked disapproval. As a soldier, he was fond of prettiness, whether of face, form, or even garments, and this costume, though neat, was severely plain. He thought of beautiful mother's ribbons and laces when at an At Home, and made protest.

"I don't like that ugly dress, auntie. Mother had all kinds of pretty-pretty's. Had n't she, bees?"

The two nodded; and frowned disgust at the plain affair before them.

Auntie stared in astonishment, and then blushed again.

"Don't you like it?" she asked meekly.

Then an idea seized her. Once a year she was invited to a grand function, and on that occasion her father insisted on a suitable dress. It seemed almost too gorgeous for the present occasion—not but that others would be quite as well robed—but somehow she had dropped dainty dresses with the rest of life's brightness. It was years since any one had cared how she looked. Why should she not, if her bees wished——

She went to a drawer, and, removing some tissue-paper, brought out a graceful summer costume, with the lightness and airiness about it which the trio recognised as the correct thing.

A threefold burst of admiration followed.

"Will that do?" she asked.

One improvement brings another. She took down her ruddy hair, and instead of doing it primly as

usual, let the little curls and tendrils lie loose and careless.

The bees glared interest and approval.

"This hat," said Burton, rejecting a more modest one, and seizing upon a large picture erection.

In for a lamb, in for a sheep! Auntie Bell pinned it on the massed curls; it drooped gracefully here, and rose gracefully there. Her cheeks were pink with excitement—her own, and her nephews'.

"Now for the danglums!" said Bennie, gleefully, rummaging among her bracelets. "This one, auntie, and this—no, this! It is prettier."

"Where's your parryshol?" demanded Bob. "Mother always has a parryshol."

She brought out a lacy affair which had not seen the light since last year's solitary festivity.

At last all were ready.

Mr. Burnham, accidentally looking out of the window, paused in astonishment.

"Come here, my dear!" he exclaimed. "Look at that! I have n't seen Bell look so pretty, so young, so—really, so positively charming, for years!"

Now it so happened that Mrs. Rouse had a special reason for hoping that Bell would look more dowdy and old-maid-like than usual, and her disgust was proportionate to her amazement when this vision of pale blue and lace, with shining eyes, brilliant cheeks, and charmingly ruffled hair sailed into the room, followed closely by three picturesque little figures in velvets and laces. Auntie's usual plan on these occasions was to greet her hostess quietly, and then retire to a corner and sink into obscurity, feeling dull and out of place among the brightness. If

a servant happened to notice that she had no tea and brought her some, she took it; if not, she went without.

But on the present occasion she ignored corners, and swept to a nice cosy chair in a prominent position. How could she feel shy and insignificant with her captain, stiff as a ramrod, on one side of her, her doctor, equally erect, on the other, and her knightly engineer, straight as an arrow, close at hand? She did n't! She felt that peacocks were modest birds beside her own exaltation. And—filling her cup of bliss to the brim—Egerton was scowling blackly upon every one, from his mother downwards.

The bees were quite at their ease. Long and painful experience had taught them how to behave in a lady's drawing-room. Once, in their young and foolish days, Burton and Bob had had a difference of opinion during one of mother's At Homes, and, not having yet learned better, horrified the guests by a sudden onslaught on one another. Mother had only smiled in her pretty way, and rung for nurse to remove them. But when the visitors had gone she had come up-stairs armed with a cane. The bees had been whipped by nurse; on great occasions they had been whipped by father; but nothing they had suffered in their short lives had been like the whipping they received from mother. Bennie, looking on, had cried almost as much from terror as his brothers had from pain. They had carried the marks on their little bodies for many a long day. The lesson had been sharp, had been cruel—mother never overlooked bad behaviour in company—but it had been learnt once for all. Never, if they lived to be ninety, would the bees forget the

manners suitable to a drawing-room; never would they so offend again.

As soon as the first greetings were over, and they had seen their lady comfortably installed, to auntie's amazement they left her, and made their way to the tea-table. There Burton took possession of a cup of tea, Bob of a cream-jug, and Bennie of the most attractive dish of cakes he could find. Auntie did not take sugar. The hostess gave a kind of gasp as she looked at her pretty cup and saucer in the childish hands, but the bees were used to far more fragile and dainty china in their own home, and there was no danger. Every eye in the room followed them in amusement or astonishment, as they did their waiting. There was not the slightest forwardness or precocity in their manner. They were simply sturdy, innocent little fellows doing, with childish gravity and care, that which they had been taught. After auntie was attended to, they turned to others, and carried round cakes and tea. They were quite at home, and quite unconscious of the notice they attracted. Nearly every one smiled at the little waiters, and auntie grew rosier than ever, and felt the room was hardly large enough to hold her. They waited gravely on everybody, but each kept an eye on his special charge, and as soon as a cake was finished one of them appeared with others. Auntie hoped that she would not become glut-tonous, it was so delightful to be thus cared for and guarded. She really must eat one more little bun for the pleasure of having it handed to her! And the quick, impatient frown that, in spite of herself, appeared on Lucy's face was absolute joy to her. Her bees were unconsciously avenging many slights and annoyances.

"Now," said the hostess, beaming upon them, "you would like a piece of cake too, would n't you?"

She was about to warn them against bits on the carpet, but there was no need. They accepted the offered cake, seated themselves on the floor at Auntie Bell's feet, disposed their tunics to receive any crumbs, and, after finishing, carefully shook themselves over the grate.

Could tidiness go farther? A little irrepressible laugh ran round the room.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEES AS CHAMPIONS

MRS. ROUSE was feeling her position keenly. By reason of her wealth, position, a certain shallow cleverness, and much determination, she was regarded rather as a leader among her friends and acquaintances, while Bell Burnham was nowhere—positively nowhere! And Bell Burnham owed her place a good deal to her so-called friend. Yet on the present occasion Bell and her bees had undoubtedly been the centre of attraction; while she—Lucy—and her really handsome boy had been almost overlooked. Somehow or other this state of affairs must be altered. How ridiculously proud and happy the creature looked!

With the kindly intention of spoiling her old companion's pleasure, and reminding her that, after all, the children were not hers—that she was merely an auntie, and as such a very second-rate sort of person—Mrs. Rouse smiled upon the three, and said:

"I suppose you are all longing for dear father and mother to come back?"

The bees stood up like little gentlemen.

"Oh no, we're not!" said Burton, in his clear childish voice. "We hope they won't ever, ever come back any more."

"Then we 'll live always with Auntie Bell," chimed in Bennie.

Bob said nothing, but he turned loving eyes towards her which spoke his sentiments louder than words.

Auntie Bell looked away, and pretended not to hear. These unfilial sentiments ought to be rebuked, and really she had not the heart to do so. Besides, she was conscious of a wicked joy in them.

Mrs. Rouse laughed nastily.

"Upon my word, Bell, you seem to have won them completely. I think some one ought to write and tell their mother she is losing their affection."

Bell's heart sank like lead, though she preserved a brave front. It would be just like Lucy to send such a letter, and suppose Annette were to become jealous and send for the bees!

As a matter of fact, Lucy did write; and, at the end of a long, chatty letter, gave her little malicious hint.

Mrs. Burnham read it thoughtfully, and then handed it to her husband. "You see, Grant, Bell has taken to them. I thought she would. She is just that kind of woman. I would n't be a bit surprised if she were willing to keep them a year instead of only six months—and then, surely, they will be old enough for school—and we need n't return home in a hurry."

And so Lucy's letter brought different feelings to what she had intended.

In the meantime she looked disapproval upon the culprits, and, appealing to others, observed: "It is dreadful to a mother to think of losing her children's love. Nothing can make up for it!"

Several agreed; but one lady, noted for her bluntness of speech, said coolly: "Don't be sham sentimental, Lucy. If Mrs. Burnham is so anxious for her children's affection, why does she leave them for months at a time—pleasure-taking?"

At which there was a slight buzz of approval, and Lucy, feeling that public opinion was against her, dropped the subject. But her indignation deepened. What, oh! what had induced Bell to dress so prettily, and be so attractive on that day of all days? Why—why could n't she have looked quiet and old-maidish as usual? And here was the Special Reason entering the room, his quick eyes glancing with interest and surprise at Miss Burnham and her bees, even while he made his way to his hostess, who received him with a gush of enthusiasm. He was tall and distinguished, with deeply embrowned face and hands, nor did the few grey hairs sprinkled above his ears detract from his appearance. There was a keenness in his eyes which had not been there in former years. Since those days Brian Coverdale had had to control men. He had been prosperous, too, in his undertakings; and wealth and success give an assurance which poverty lacks.

Mrs. Rouse set her small white teeth momentarily into her lower lip. She had counted on such a contrast between her own daintily dressed, plump little person, and Bell's ordinarily dowdy style, and pale, quiet face. And now, if anything, the contrast was in the latter's favour. Lucy had grown stouter. Not uncomfortably so—not by any means so as to be uncomely, not even more than was to be expected in the mother of a fine handsome boy; but still—she was

obliged to admit to herself that it was not the slim, girlish Lucy whom Mr. Coverdale had left behind who now greeted him; while as for Bell!—well, so far as appearances were concerned that afternoon it might have been the pretty slender girl of years ago. And then—Lucy could have stamped—Bell showed not the slightest embarrassment or discomfort at the unexpected meeting. She shook hands, uttered a few pleasant surprised words of greeting, and turned to speak to her nephews. The unconscious bees were a wonderful shield, if she required one.

"You are to go into the garden and play, dears," she said in her gentle voice.

The three obediently followed their hostess through the wide open French window, and disappeared in company with Egerton. Auntie never said, "Now, don't be naughty!" an omission which the bees approved. As for nurse's phrase, "Be good, if you can!" they had never heard it since their arrival.

A good many eyes followed them enviously. What would n't the main part of the company have given for permission to go into the bright sunshine, instead of having to listen to the youthful genius now produced!

The performance was of the usual class—a clever child, certainly, but—. The audience shrugged their shoulders and longed for the end.

Brian Coverdale, leaning against the window, and half concealed by a curtain, thought he heard sounds in the garden that it might be better to investigate. Quietly he moved away. A few long strides brought him to a little grassy nook. There he paused in amusement at the scene before him. Bennie and Bob,

red with excitement, were standing with their sturdy legs planted well apart, and their tingling fists thrust deep into their pockets to keep them out of the way of temptation. Burton and Egerton were facing one another, evidently about to settle their differences by an appeal to arms. Egerton was moving his left elbow up and down as a means of defence, and threatening with uncertain blows from his clenched right fist. Burton had no notion of preliminaries. Ignoring the menaces he hurled himself upon his foe, brought him to the ground, and proceeded to pummel him energetically, while Egerton was too much astonished to do more than try and defend himself.

Mr. Coverdale gave a smothered laugh, and stepping forward seized both warriors by their collars, and hauled them to their feet.

"Now then, what's all this about? Stop fighting, boys!"

Accustomed to prompt obedience Burton stood still, panting. "I won't run away!" he promised, and Brian released him in order to attend to his more refractory prisoner. By the time Egerton was persuaded of the fruitlessness of resistance, and Mr. Coverdale could turn to look for his late captive, he felt that the promise of not running away might as well have been broken so far as knowledge of the little fighter was concerned. The bees stood side by side, and if Burton was hot with exertion, his brothers were equally so with excitement. Identity was lost; though, to do Burton justice, it was not done purposely.

"Now, what 's the row about?"

The bees answered with one voice: "He called Auntie Bell a old maid!"

"Well, she is one!" shouted Egerton. "Mother says so! A regular one!"

"She is n't!" chorused three angry shouts. "She was one, but she is n't any longer!"

Was n't an old maid a lady who had no little boys of her own to love her, and were n't they her own now? And did n't they love her with all their hearts? Of course she was n't an old maid! No one should call her so!

"Is that so?" said Mr. Coverdale, slowly, and if a slight shade of disappointment and trouble clouded his face the children were too young either to see or understand. Then he looked gravely at Egerton. "But even if it were so it is a rude name to call a lady, and you deserve a thrashing."

Burton brightened. He gave a hasty glance round. No one was to be seen. There was no company. He slipped his hand into Mr. Coverdale's.

"Could n't we fight it out?" he coaxed. "You could see fair play."

"Oh, Burton!" burst out the others. "It's our turn now. You've had yours."

"Won't do!" said the soldier. "You're fresh, and Egerton is n't! It must be me again."

The two sighed, but nodded.

Mr. Coverdale shook his head. "The ladies are coming. No more fighting."

Instantly the bees were models of deportment as they looked round for auntie. Freedom was over. Company manners must be assumed.

The visitors poured out on to the lawn, murmuring

the customary platitudes and vague nothings to their hostess. Auntie Bell came forward, the rosy colour still on her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. She was accompanied by Mrs. Rouse.

Again the bees proved wondrous shields and protectors as they ranged themselves by her side. No longer were there scuffles as to who was to be the left-out one—auntie, unfortunately, having only two hands,—their places were now taken strictly in turn. If auntie's cheeks grew a little rosier it might well have been from satisfaction at the sight of her nephews.

"Are they Grant's children?" asked Mr. Coverdale, smiling.

Bell smiled equally easily. "Yes. They are staying with me for a few months. Come, bees! you must say 'good-bye' to Mrs. Leigh, and then we must hurry home. Grandma will be wanting her tea."

Mrs. Rouse bit her lip. There was no embarrassment, no nervous blushes. Auntie watched, with open pride and interest, as her pretty bees made their polite and gentlemanly adieus, and then, with a gay nod and laugh, started homewards, still protected on all sides by her trio.

"You will find many changes since you were here," said Mrs. Rouse, as her companion stood gazing with grave interest after the children—or was it their aunt? Again the bees were shielding. She could not make out who it was at which he was looking so intently.

"I beg your pardon!"—with a start. "You were saying——?"

"That time has worked many changes," said Lucy, inly boiling, but laughing affectedly. "This makes

me feel quite an elderly personage at times." She patted Egerton's shoulder.

"And I am grey," laughed Mr. Coverdale. Then he glanced after the disappearing blue dress. "But time has stood still there. I might have seen her yesterday."

Mrs. Rouse made no reply. And he had not even contradicted her own deprecatory remark! Oh, Bell should pay! Bell should pay for this! But, why! why!! why!!! had n't he returned a few weeks earlier?

Auntie and her escort arrived home in the best of spirits. They had had a most agreeable and satisfactory afternoon. They changed their fine feathers for more homely costumes, and, finding that grandpa and grandma had unexpectedly gone out for the evening, ate their tea with appetite, in a gale of good fellowship.

Auntie was perfectly aware that she owed to her nephews her most unparalleled triumph. She knew she had been a centre of attraction, and it had been very pleasant to once again be *in* things, instead of a sad outsider. She was also aware—though this she would scarcely admit, even to herself—that they had saved her in what might have been a very painful and embarrassing surprise. Lucy had had little opportunity of shooting her barbed shafts, and she, who had suffered of old, knew something of what she had escaped. She was very grateful to her champions. They must be rewarded.

"Bees, we have half-an-hour before bedtime. How would you like a game of cross-clack in the field?"

"Auntie," said Bennie, casting himself upon her, "I don't know how we *lived* before we knew you."

"It was but a wegitubble desistance," observed Burton, with the flattery which slips so easily from a soldier's tongue.

Bob said nothing, but his look conveyed volumes. Auntie's cheeks blazed with womanly blushes. Words were beyond her, and she could not meet the ardent gaze of her admirers. She spoke not, but the bees did not misunderstand her silence! They were conscious that their devoted affection was returned. She shook with stress of feeling, and reflected that she really must be careful what she said before the children, or allowed them to hear. They were so quick in picking up extraordinary phrases, and their luck in using them at telling moments was phenomenal.

The bees pranced gaily along by her side. They had small acquaintance with the usual childish games. No one had taught them, and they had never played with other children. They had had to invent all their amusements. Consequently they looked upon auntie as a perfect mine of interesting information; and as a playfellow she was without peer.

"How do you play?"

Burton was hanging on to one hand, Bob to the other, and Bennie hampering progress by clutching her dress and walking backwards. An occasional stumble only added to the hilarity of the party.

"I will be catcher. I shall run after Burton, and none of you must let me touch him, and the way you can hinder me is this. Bob must run in between us, and then I shall have to leave Burton and run after him, and then Bennie must run in, and I shall let Bob alone and chase Bennie. Do you understand? I must always try to catch the one who has run between,

and as soon as I can hit some one he must chase me till some one else runs across the path. Now, are you ready?"

The bees grasped the idea, clenched their fists, and prepared to run their hardest. Auntie started in pursuit. She soon found that she had undertaken more than she had expected. No bee had any intention of being out of the game for a second longer than he could help. They dodged in between incessantly, and each time she had to pull up with a jerk, and start on a fresh course. Auntie's breath came in quick pants, her heart throbbed wildly, and she was beginning to feel that she had n't a stride left in her, when at last she succeeded in touching Bob. The necessity for instant flight nerved her to a last spurt for safety, as he turned in pursuit. With spent breath she squealed, "Oh, bees, save me!" and as the gallant soldier, ever ready to succour a female in distress, dashed to the rescue, while the chivalrous doctor kindly slackened pace, she sank, exhausted and laughing, to the ground.

But auntie had promised to play, and as soon 'as she had taken a few moments' rest she again joined the game. For half-an-hour the welkin rang with the shrieks of three joyous voices, and, in moments of intense excitement, it must be admitted that a fourth was added, which equalled the others in excitement and excelled them in volume.

At length Minnie, who had been entrusted with the keeping of the time, and who had been secretly watching the fun, and, like the ranks of Tuscany of old, "could scarce forbear to cheer," sounded the retiring gong.

Auntie turned homewards, feeling like a limp and washed-out rag; while the bees, rather refreshed than otherwise by their late exertions, still frolicked gaily on their way.

Once in the house she sank, inert, on to a chair, and watched her nephews working off superabundant steam—auntie had n't a fraction of steam left—by turning head over heels.

Such, she moralised, was the difference in the effect exertion had on age and on youth.

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CHAPTER IX

THE SWIMMING-BATHS

“**B**EES, would you like to learn to swim?”

The previous summer a swimming teacher had visited the town, and so worked upon the enthusiasm of several ladies that they had gone round to their friends urging and persuading, and had eventually managed to form themselves into a club for the purpose of learning the art. Twice a week they hired the town bath for an afternoon, and they, and their young children, disported under the instruction of a competent mistress. Miss Burnham had been invited to join, and had done so with pleasure, delighted with the opportunity of practising an accomplishment which she had learnt years ago, and in which she was an expert. Mrs. Rouse was also one of the band, and, after many struggles, managed to get the width of the bath with pantings and blowings. As for Egerton, after shrieking for the first half-dozen times he was taken, he eventually plucked up courage enough to hang on to the iron rail that ran round the bath. After that he progressed to the extent of being able to paddle about, with the aid of floats under his arms. At this point he stuck, but both he and his adoring mother thought his progress marvellous.

The bees hesitated over their reply to auntie's ques-

tion. Some time ago they had seen a puppy taught, and the process had not struck them as alluring. The owner had flung the whimpering, shivering little creature into a pond. Whining and frightened it had struggled back to land, only to be flung out again. At this point the bees' knowledge of the art of teaching swimming ceased, for their indignant nurse, hearing them planning a combined attack on the man for the purpose of rescue, dragged them away.

Burton and Bob slowly shook their heads, but looked at Bennie for the deciding word, well aware that his power of foreseeing the use of things was beyond theirs. That far-sighted gentleman was considering deeply. In imagination he projected himself to Injia's coral strand. Suppose, in the days when he had to make roads and build bridges for Burton's troops, he should desire to give orders to some one on the other bank of the river, before the bridge was raised. If there were no boat it might be awkward. Decidedly, swimming in that case would be useful. Bennie drew a long breath. He did n't like the prospect; but he said, "Yes, auntie."

The two sighed. But it was not for them to decline if Bennie decided otherwise; so they nodded an assent, and thought of the puppy.

And yet, curiously enough, Bennie was the most afraid of the three. For Bennie had imagination. Burton rarely looked ahead, or thought of possible danger until it arrived. Bob, though watchful, and keenly on the look-out for others in whom he might be interested, did not think much for himself. But Bennie saw, in his mind's eye, every detail. He felt the water close over his face, and he imagined his

own struggles. Already he vaguely realised that he often feared when Burton and Bob did not; but nothing on earth would have induced him to shirk what they were willing to undertake. In fact it probably made him do what they would have declined. It was only beforehand, and in imagination, that Bennie dreaded; once in action he was as fearless as his brothers.

Auntie looked pleased. "Then I 'll make you some costumes, and next club day we 'll begin."

A couple of days later auntie entered the baths, followed by three exceedingly serious-faced nephews. The amount of water was somewhat alarming, and the black lines that ran along the bottom of the white-tiled floor wiggled and waggled in a manner that made their flesh creep.

There were a good many people already disporting. They did n't look like ladies exactly; and they certainly did not look like gentlemen, though they wore tight—well, call them knickerbockers. The bees surveyed the hybrids doubtfully.

Auntie paused to chat with a friend, and Egerton Rouse, clinging to the iron rail, kicked his heels insolently in the water, and rent the air with derisive shouts as he noted the grave faces.

"Babies! babies! red-headed babies! Frightened! Frightened of the water! Cowards!"

That settled the matter. What! Were they to stand insults of that kind? Never! Dread of the water was forgotten. They would get into that bath! they would immediately learn to swim! they would pulverise the derider!

A laugh went round the room, and, glancing down,

auntie found that they had planted themselves then and there on the ground, and were already removing their shoes and stockings.

She smiled. "Come up-stairs, darlings! There are some nice little rooms where we can undress, and leave our clothes."

She turned away, and the three followed, carrying their foot-gear. It did not take long before they were in their costumes.

"Wait for me," said auntie, going into her own room. "Don't go down, I won't be long."

Presently she came out. "Come, bees."

The amazed trio stared at her doubtfully. The voice was certainly Auntie Bell's, but the figure! Dubiously they surveyed her. She was dressed exactly like themselves, and—breathe it not!—showed the same amount of—er—leg and arm. But was it? Could it be? Her ruddy hair was hidden under a cap, so there was no way of identifying her by that.

"Is it—is it Auntie Bell?" they murmured, touching her hand.

She laughed, and knelt down. "Of course it is, my bees! Don't you know me?"

Closer inspection proved satisfactory, the grave faces relaxed into smiles, and they even hailed the change with approval.

"If you always dressed like us, auntie, you would be able to race faster," they suggested.

She laughed again, and ran down-stairs, closely followed by her nephews. "Wait a minute, bees," she said over her shoulder. "I'll come back for you."

Taking the last two steps at a jump she joined her hands above her head, and leaped out—a glorious leap

and dive which took her nearly from end to end of the bath.

The bees' eyes almost started from their heads in admiration and horror. They had not caught her words. It was appalling! But if that was the way to enter a bath no one—*no one* should accuse them of showing the white feather!—certainly not that squalling Egerton.

Scarcely had auntie's splash died down, and she was still cleaving her way under water, when the three, joining their hands above their heads, hurled themselves in desperate imitation after her.

There was a universal shriek of laughter and dismay. Every nymph in the bath or out of it hastened to the rescue; and by the time auntie arrived at the surface, and was able to lend a horrified ear to the tale, the heroes had been picked up and carried to the rail, and were already energetically working their way round, hand over hand, to where Egerton was hanging and again shouting taunts. As Burton arrived, prepared to castigate, he settled his floats under his arms, and paddled off into the centre of the bath, where he was safe.

With a rather white face auntie made her way to her boys. She could n't scold the little fellows. They had had no intention of wrong-doing.

"Come along, Burton!" she said. "I'll show you how to swim."

Burton was willing to do anything in order to be able to pursue Egerton. He thrashed the water with energetic arms and legs in every direction, till auntie, almost helpless with laughter, nearly dropped him.

Fascinated by the bees' bonniness and heroism, one

admiring maiden approached Bob, and proffered instruction. She half expected a silent shake of the head, or at the best a shy refusal, but the bees knew not timidity. Letting go, with one hand, of the rail to which he was clinging—the water was far too deep even at the shallow end for him to stand—he stretched it out to her, with a beaming and grateful smile.

"Thank you very much!" he said, and from that moment the susceptible heart was at his feet—that is to say, at the feet of the bees in a body, for two minutes after she had hung him on the rail again she could not have identified him. Claspings her neck confidently, and thus causing a fresh gush of emotion, as she carried him out deeper, he added: "I want to learn very fast. I do want to swim." He gave no reason, but his eye dwelt malevolently on Egerton, and his new friend felt that admiration with which a woman always regards physical courage in a man. Bob was a more deliberate pupil than Burton. He listened carefully to directions, and carried them out to the best of his ability.

Encouraged by her friend's success, another love-sick maid approached Bennie, and being received with equal gratitude, took him in charge. In fact, before the bees had been five minutes in the water they had won a dozen hearts, and nearly every one in the place was willing and eager to help the plucky, polite little fellows, who smiled upon everybody who spoke to them. "Bell Burnham's bees," as they were laughingly called, bade fair to be favourites.

But all this was gall and wormwood to Mrs. Rouse.

"How ridiculously proud Bell is of her red-headed nephews!" she remarked to a friend.

But her choice of a confidante was not happy. The friend in question was the one who had rescued Bennie after his heroic dive, and the child had clasped his legs round her waist, and his arms round her neck, and under that unique embrace she had felt indescribable thrills, and when she had found that there was wet on the little fellow's cheeks, not accounted for by the water in the bath, and he had clung to her, half sobbing, "You won't tell any one I cried? You won't tell, will you, please?" she became his slave, and, holding him tightly, vowed to keep the secret forever; and, what is more, kept her vow. So in response to Mrs. Rouse's remark, she said:

"I am sure I don't wonder! They are the sweetest darlings I ever saw in my life!"

What with a child's natural love of water, and the kindness of all around them, the bees had a most delightful time, and were sorry when auntie announced: "Out you go! It is quite long enough for a first attempt!"

"It's a nicer way of learning than the puppy had," they confided to three admirers who had proffered to dry them while auntie had a few minutes for her own amusement. "We did n't like that way. We thought auntie would throw us in, and leave us to get out if we could."

They peeped down, almost bursting with pride at the doings of their distinguished relative. "She's a beautiful swimmer, is n't she?" they demanded. "No one crawls about at the bottom of the bath so long as she does. And she is very brave! We did n't like it when the water went over our faces, but she does n't mind a bit! It is a great thing to have a Auntie Bell!"

And they clapped and cheered aloud when she dived from the spring-board.

They almost forgot their animosity to Egerton, and patronised him kindly as a boy who had n't an auntie.

"I've got a mother, though!" expostulated that gentleman.

"We've got a mother away across the seas," they assured him. "But we've got a Auntie Bell too."

Their pride and satisfaction were so evident that Egerton was reduced to demanding in injured tones, "Why don't I have a Auntie Bell, mother? I want one too."

Mrs. Rouse said nothing; but she looked round suspiciously among her friends, detecting smiles where smiles were not.

At length auntie emerged, and, after dressing, made an interesting suggestion—she was full of interesting suggestions.

"Well, bees! who says 'buns' in town?"

They all said "buns."

"Thank the ladies who have been so kind to you, and come along."

The ladies were ignorant which were their special loves, but the bees knew them, and went round on their grateful errand. "I won't ever, ever forget how good you were in pulling me out of the water," whispered Bennie to his rescuer, offering a kiss in his gratitude. "And you've promised not to tell, have n't you?"

On the way to the shops the three chatted gaily, told each other of their various exploits, and requested to be taken again.

"We'd like to do things like you, auntie," they

informed her. "No one did like you! Egerton's mother was n't up to much! He was quite ashamed of her!"

It was years since auntie had been set on a pedestal and admired. She enjoyed her eminence extremely, though modestly informing her nephews that she hoped before long they would do quite as well, if not better. This they, with equal modesty, looked upon as a good joke, and laughed accordingly.

Their exertions had given them good appetites—not that the bees often failed in this respect—and their mouths watered as they looked at the stacks of buns.

"Which will you have?" auntie asked.

It was in ways of this kind that she showed such thoughtful consideration. So many people—if they had given refreshment at all—would have chosen what was good for them, instead of giving a free hand. Fortunately hunger made them reject richness, and go in for quantity, in the shape of large bath buns, with which they walked into the inner room and planted themselves at the table pointed out by auntie, leaving her to order her own special fancy—auntie had a juvenile taste for sweets—glasses of milk, and also various things required at home.

"There's the gentleman who would n't let me fight any more," said Burton.

Mr. Coverdale, the only other inhabitant of the room, smiled at his young acquaintances, and left his own table to greet them.

All three removed their caps and slid from their chairs to shake hands.

"Well, bees, what are you doing here?"

"Having buns," they responded, swarming to their seats again.

"We've been having a bath with auntie," they informed him, speaking excitedly.

That unfortunate lady, still engaged in her purchases, heard the astounding piece of information, and in amazement looked at a large mirror opposite which gave her a view of the quartette.

"And, oh! you should have seen her!" they pursued breathlessly and in turn.

"She had trousers which only came to here on her legs!"

Auntie jumped violently. A swimming costume is short, but surely not quite so attenuated as the length Burton was indicating on his own sturdy limbs.

"And no sleeves! not a bit of one! Quite as little as mother wears when she goes to parties," continued Bennie.

"And no bothering skirty things about her legs!—and everything tight!" added Bob.

The dress which had been appropriate in its proper place sounded singularly indelicate when thus described.

"You should have seen her!" they again assured him as one man. "And you should have seen what she did! She turned head over heels, and kicked her legs till splashes were everywhere!"

Auntie had never heard her nether limbs referred to in polite society for ages, and was scarlet. In her embarrassment she ordered a currant seed cake.

"A currant cake and a seed one, ma'am?" inquired the saleswoman, wondering what made her customer so hot and unlike her quiet self. She was not attending to anything but her duties.

"Yes, please" murmured auntie, unconsciously saddling herself with one she did not require.

The conversation—if conversation it could be called, when three talked and one listened in paralysed wonder—continued.

"And, oh! the splendid way in which she jumped right in, with her legs and arms flying everywhere!" (Legs again! Why could n't they refer to something else?) "And crawled about at the bottom, and turned round and round, and jerked herself along, and took hold of her feet with her hands, and put her head back!" gasped Burton, hardly able to get out his words in his excitement.

"And the way she lay down on her front, and slid down that shiny board!"

"You should have seen her!" they assured him for the third time.

"Ye powers!" murmured Mr. Coverdale, as there came a lull in the outpouring. He was hopelessly at sea.

By this time auntie had ordered many things which she did not require, and now made her way, with cheeks like poppies, to the little group.

"We have been to the swimming-baths," she said, endeavouring to maintain a semblance of coolness, though she knew she was blazing.

All four gentlemen hastened to bring her a chair.

"The swimming-baths!" ejaculated the amazed Mr. Coverdale, at length receiving light on the subject. "You've been to the swimming-baths, have you?"

"Been having a bath with auntie," reiterated the embarrassing bees.

Their seniors did the best that was left them. They looked at one another and broke into a laugh.

"If you will allow me I'll bring my cup of coffee here and join you," said Mr. Coverdale.

"Darlings!" whispered auntie, hurriedly. "Do eat your buns now, and don't, *don't* speak about my—my legs again! Have you come home for a visit?" she inquired, bursting desperately into conversation on the first subject that came into her head, in hopes of stopping further revelations on the part of her nephews.

The expression of amusement vanished, and his face clouded.

"No, not for a visit; for—well, I was going to say 'for good,' but I think I mean 'for bad.'"

Auntie looked inquiringly, and her hot cheeks cooled a trifle.

"It's a breakdown—a thorough breakdown. I've had fever till I've lost count of the times, and at last the doctor said if I did n't come home at once I should probably stay there forever."

"Oh, I'm sorry! But, perhaps you will be able to return."

"No. It's an unhealthy part. I've stood it longer than most men, so I suppose I ought n't to grumble; but it is a blow. A man does n't like to think he's done working before he is quite middle-aged."

"I did n't know you were going to so unhealthy a place."

"I was n't; but things had n't turned out as I hoped."

He looked at her suddenly, but she was watching with some anxiety as Bennie carefully lifted h

of milk to his lips. "P'r'aps I'd better go down to it till it's a bit emp'ier," he suggested.

"So," resumed Mr. Coverdale, "when the offer came I liked the excitement, and I liked the work, and the pay was enormous, so I took the risk. There was no one to care whether I lived or died."

He spoke quietly, not as complaining, but simply stating a fact.

"Perhaps you will find something else to do," suggested Bell, hardly knowing what she said in her dismay at the denial and flutter in her own mind.

"Perhaps so. But at present I'm on the sick-list, and it's rather a trial for a fellow who three or four years ago did n't know what illness meant."

He laughed; but his laugh had a certain impatience and anger in it.

Bob put down his nearly finished bun.

"Can't the doctors make you well?" he inquired gravely. "I'm going to be a doctor when I'm grown up. I'll cure you."

"Thanks, very much!" was the grateful reply. "But, you see, Bee, it's rather a long time to wait, is n't it?"

"That's the worst of it!" assented the embryo doctor, thoughtfully. "I'll be some while growing up. Auntie's going to be a nurse so that we can all keep together. She will nurse Captain Burton's troops and Sir Bennie's workmen."

"I'm sure she will make a very nice one," laughed Mr. Coverdale, amused to find his young friend's walk in life settled so early.

Bob nodded, and pursued his own line of thought. "A good nurse is half a battle!" As quoters and

mimics the bees excelled; and he was now recalling the words of his medical man during an illness of his own. "Good nursing is as important as good doctrin. In fack, at this stage of the cump'aint it is even more valer'ble."

"I think so, too," assented Brian in a low tone, with his eyes on auntie.

Bob dropped quotation, and fell back on his natural intelligence.

"And Auntie Bell is quite grown up, so she could begin at once till I 'm ready."

With a heightened colour, the harassed lady invented immediate stress of business.

"Bees, if you have finished we must go at once, or I shall never get through my shopping."

CHAPTER X

POLL

“**W**HAT’s that noise, bees?”

They were digging in the field at the back of grandpa’s house. The field was a large one, and led, by means of stiles, into other fields on either side. At the bottom flowed a river. A little higher up the river was narrow and rapid, and a little lower down it was narrow and rapid again, but opposite grandpa’s house, and for the length of a couple of elds on either side, was a long island which divided it into two parts. On the opposite side of the island ran the main part of the water, but on the nearer one there was a broad, shallow stream, which rippled over the stones, and made a pleasant murmur in the summer. In very dry seasons the flow would even sometimes cease, and merely large pools glisten in the sunshine. Then in the winter would come a change of scene, and the waters would rush along; and even in the autumn a violent storm would sometimes so deepen the waters that any one on the island would be held prisoner till they went down.

At the present time it was at that stage in which it allowed very pleasant paddling for three small boys. For reasons best known to herself, auntie had required a promise that they would not go into the fields on either side of their own special playground.

On this day the bees had been left to themselves. Auntie had to go out and could not take them, so they had found their spades and gone to dig in the field.

They had been working for some time, and getting very hot and moist while doing so, when Bob fancied he heard an unusual sound. After stopping and listening several times he became sure of it, and dropped his spade, with the exclamation:

"What's that noise, bees? Some one's hurt. It's some one crying."

They looked in every direction. There was no one in the field, so far as they could make out.

"It comes from over there, I b'lieve!" said Burton, pointing to the island.

"A dog!" exclaimed Bob. "Look! Can't you see him?"

Sure enough, they could just make out a head among some low bushes at the opposite side.

"What's the matter, old chap?" shouted Bob. "Come here! Here, sir, here! Good dog! Come along, then!"

The animal raised its head, whining piteously, but made no attempt to move.

"What's wrong with him?" speculated the bees. "He must be hurt not to come out. Come along, old fellow! Good doggie, then! Here!"

They patted their knees, and did their best to coax at the top of their voices, but though the dog whimpered in response, it remained where it was.

"He's hurt!" said Bob, decidedly. "We must help him."

Bennie and Burton sat down and pulled off shoes and stockings. Bob, with other ideas in his mind,

sought Minnie. He found her washing the kitchen floor, and immediately threw himself upon her.

"Minnie," he said, with his arms round her neck, "can I have a big slice of bread and a cup to get some water in? Please, dear Minnie."

Minnie smiled upon him. She adored the bees, one and all. "Of course you can, Master Bee, darling."

She cut three thick rounds, concluding that what one boy wanted the chance was all three did, plastered them liberally with butter, and folded them together—butter inwards. Bob's next proceeding showed the wisdom of this. He immediately stuffed it up his tunic, tightening his belt to prevent its escape.

"He's the sweetest of the three!" murmured the admiring Minnie, who always came to that conclusion about the last one whom she saw.

Bob ran after his brothers, and the three were quickly across the stream.

As they came up to the dog they discovered the cause of his strange stillness, and they also discovered his condition. The poor creature had been horribly tormented. His coat was rough, and matted with blood from several wounds; his bones nearly started through his skin; his eyes were dim, and his tongue parched and dry. Round his neck was a strong cord, and tied to the end of it was a tin can. How he had got to the island was a mystery, but he had evidently been chased, and escaped on to it. There, racing along in his terror, the can had caught between two stones. The poor dog had torn at it, rushing round and round where the cord allowed him to go, thoroughly entangled himself in shrubs and bushes, and finally tied himself up so tightly that he could

only lie still and howl. How long he had stayed there before the trio had discovered him cannot be told.

"Oh, poor old chap! poor old chap!" they cried.

They freed him, with some difficulty, by untying the knot round his neck. The poor thing whined gratitude, and made an attempt to struggle to his feet, but was too weak. His parched tongue and lean sides told their own tale, even to children.

"He's thirsty and hungry," said Bob, running down to the stream. The cup which he had so thoughtfully brought proved of use now, and the dog lapped up the water with evident delight.

"What a pity we have n't something to eat!" said Burton.

The doctor unfastened his belt, and produced his three slices of bread and butter, at the sight of which the patient gave a short yelp.

"Not much at a time," said the cautious medical man, breaking off a small piece and offering it. "When a person has been nearly starved to death he must only be 'lowed a little bit, or it might prove fakal."

"What's fakal?" demanded Burton, concluding it was some technical term which it was, of course, a doctor's duty to know, but of which he, as a soldier, need feel no shame in confessing ignorance.

"It means he might die off at once, without giving us a word of warning."

Burton and Bennie were horrified. What a blessing it was they had a physician with them! Left to themselves, they might, with mistaken kindness, have let the poor animal have it all, and so killed him on the spot. The dog eyed the bread wistfully, and gulped down the small pieces with which he was fed.

Whatever he thought of the doctor's treatment, he made no attempt to avoid it, but accepted what was offered, and occasionally feebly licked the hands that fed him.

At last it was all gone, and the next thing was to consider what was to be done with him. In spite of his meal, he still could not rise to his feet. When the bees coaxed he tried, but was obliged to give it up.

"I'll tell you what we must do," said Bob. "We must look for some place on the island where he can be inside if it rains. In his weak condition he must *not* take a chill."

So after promising their patient, who protested against their leaving him, that they would return, they started off on a journey of discovery.

Burton and Bennie were interested in all they saw, but Bob was absorbed in looking for a suitable place; therefore, as was only right, he was the first to find something which showed possibilities.

"What 's that?" He was staring into a huge water-butt which had lain in its present position for several years, and had, in process of time, become so overgrown with grass and brushwood as to make its discovery unlikely, save either by accident or by some such ardent explorer as was now scanning it. "I do b'lieve it's a kennel all ready for us. I'll crawl in and see if anything lives there," he said, suiting the action to the word.

His voice came back immediately: "No, it's emp'y; and it's big—big enough to hold all of us, and more of us too, if there were any. Come in, bees!"

When the three emerged their faces were full of satisfaction.

"Pommy word, it might have been made for us!" said Bob.

They pulled enough grass to make a soft bed, and went back.

"How are we to get him there?" demanded Burton. "He's a big dog, and I don't see how we can carry him. Can you walk now, poor old chap? Up!"

But walking was still beyond its power.

"We'll carry him in my overall," said Bob, his invention quickened by his sympathy. "Unbutton it, bees, and lay it on the ground."

By mingled coaxing and pushing they managed to get the animal on to it. They must have hurt him, but he evidently understood that it was all for his good, for he merely whined when the touch was too painful, and immediately tried to lick the nearest hand, as though to assure them that he was not protesting, but only whimpering a trifle when the agony was too acute.

With slow and steady steps and much panting, for the dog was large and heavy in spite of his thinness, they carried him to his kennel, and introduced him therein.

"Leave him on my overall," said the wise doctor, "in case the grass is a bit damp. It would never do for him to take cold."

Then they sat down, fondling their new pet, and feeling as tired as they had a right to feel after their arduous labours.

"I wonder whose he is?" speculated Bennie.

"Ours," said Burton, decidedly. "We've found him. He would have starved to death if it had n't been for us; so we'll keep him."

"Then we must give him a name."

They tried several, but none satisfied them. At last Burton was seized with an idea.

"He belongs to bees—let 's call him 'Honey.' "

"Honey?" said Bob, doubtfully. "It is n't like a dog's name."

"What 's the stuff bees get on their hind legs?" demanded Bennie, vaguely. The bees had learnt a few things since coming to live with Auntie Bell.

"Pollen!" shouted Burton. "That 's it, Bennie! And we can call him Poll for short."

Regardless of the feminine sound of the name, Pollen—and Poll for short—was decided upon.

With great sagacity Poll accepted the title at once, and answered to it as though he had been called so from puppyhood.

It was at this satisfactory stage of the proceedings that in the distance was heard a faint call. The bees responded at once, and tore down to the water's edge.

"We 're here, Auntie Bell! Here we are! Come over and see what we 've found."

Auntie looked at the water, hesitated, and then shouted, "Wait a minute! I 'll come to you," and she sprinted across the grass at a speed which recalled her youthful days, which, somehow, did not seem to be quite so far away now as they had been before the advent of her nephews, taking the stile between the fields with the grace and rapidity of a daddy-long-legs, or perhaps, considering that she was a lady, a jenny-spinner would be more appropriate.

The bees watched her with approval. There were not many grown-ups who could run like that, so far as their experience—certainly limited—went. But

where was she going? Half-way across the next field she suddenly turned sharply towards the river, and—*ran across the top of the water.*

With their eyes almost bulging from their heads with surprise and admiration, the trio hastened to meet this embodiment of all that was marvellous. Eight arms clasped in a fervent embrace, as the long-sundered relatives met; four mouths kissed fervently.

The bees' speech was incoherent and breathless. "Oh, auntie! How did you do it? Oh, auntie! We did n't know people could walk on water! Do tell us! Oh, do show us! Auntie, how *clever* you are! And your shoes are n't even wet!"

"Show you what? I don't know what you mean!"

"Do tell us how you did it, auntie! We saw you run across the top of the river!"

Auntie laughed, and reluctantly revealed her private reason for forbidding them to enter the next field. "I was n't on the water. There are some stepping-stones, but you can't see them from here."

"Oh-h-h!" they sighed disappointedly. "Only stepping-stones! Auntie, the poor dog whined so—he was tied up—he was hungry—we have found a kennel—he's there—come and see him!"

Auntie was growing an adept in piecing exclamations together and making out a story. She now grasped sufficient to say, "Very well!"

On the way they became more intelligible, and when she saw the poor bag of bones which called himself a dog she comprehended most of the story.

Poll accepted her at once when introduced by his young masters, and licked the compassionate hand that touched his head.

"He must stay here," she decided. "For one thing, he is too big to carry, and too weak to walk. And then, besides, grandma does n't like dogs in the house. Poor thing! he looks starved! I'll tell you what I'll do! When you have had tea I will bring him a big basin of bread and milk and other scraps. He might have a bone to-morrow, I think. What do you say, doctor?"

"I think that will be a wise plan, nurse?"

"Well, suppose we go now. The sooner that poor creature has something to eat the better. By the way, where is your overall?"

"Poll is lying on it, for fear of the damp."

Auntie was so considerate over matters of that kind. She saw the necessities of a case so very rapidly. What was the loss of an overall, and the dirtying of a suit of clothes, compared to the chance of a chill for some one who was ill?

They went by the stepping-stones. "We can have some fun jumping over these, can't we?" remarked Burton, with considerable satisfaction at the thought of future joys.

Which was the exact frame of mind auntie had expected and had tried to guard against.

"No," she said firmly. "Never unless I am with you. I must have your word of honour, bees."

"Can we when we've learned to swim, auntie?" demanded Burton, looking disappointed.

"Perhaps, but not at present. Promise, darlings."

"Are you nervish, auntie? Very well, then, precious!"

The bees sighed a little, but there were many pleasures still left in life. Perhaps it would be a pity to risk drowning for the sake of a few jumps.

CHAPTER XI

AUNTIE GOES TO TOWN

THE weather was really atrocious. Every now and then the rain swept down in drenching torrents, which cleared the streets of people in about one minute; the wind came in sharp gusts, and it was cold—very cold! In fact, it was one of those days in which summer seems to retire altogether, and to leave the other seasons to work their will without let or hindrance. And the worst of it was, from Auntie Bell's point of view, that she had to go to town for some shopping.

"We 'll come with you, auntie," the ever-ready bees informed her.

But she looked out, and shook her head. "It's too wet and windy."

In vain they assured her that in her sweet presence hurricanes were as zephyrs, and driving rain as balmy sunshine. Though highly gratified she stood firm.

"Besides, bees," she observed, trying another argument, "if I don't have to pay your fares in the cars there will be all that money for sweets. I thought perhaps you would like to play shops this afternoon, and shops without sweets are n't much good, are they?"

In such delicate perceptions no one could beat their

esteemed relative. The bees admitted the force of the argument, and decided to remain at home.

"We might have a really good game after dinner," she suggested. "Or, if you liked, I could tell you a tale."

"P'r'aps there would be time for both," said Bennie.

After which they accompanied her to her room, in order to assist in dressing, as usual.

By this time their usefulness was beyond question. What there was in auntie's room that they did not know was scarcely worth mentioning. In some marvellous way they had learnt the places in which she kept all her things, and not only that, but they knew the costume suitable for any particular occasion. Such few articles as she deemed private she was reduced to locking up. Not that they were at all prying, but they had the gift of observation, and when they once saw anything put by or taken out they noticed, and knew where to look for it in the future. Auntie was tidy and methodical.

"This rakkleshedan hat, I s'pose, auntie?" said Burton in dissatisfied tones, bringing out headgear that was more remarkable for use than for beauty.

Auntie's clothes had changed for the better since the advent of her critical nephews—that is, for the prettier. On one occasion she had taken them with her to look on, while she chose a dress—at least, that had been her impression. Before she had been at the dressmaker's five minutes she realised that they had brought *her* to look on, while *they* chose the dress.

With their customary politeness they hauled up a chair for her to the table, and Bob and Burton took

possession of one on either side, on which they knelt, in order to raise themselves to a convenient height. The number of chairs being limited, Bennie found himself seatless, therefore swarmed to the table, and planted himself there.

"If you have n't any bejection?" he said, with a winning smile at the fascinated dressmaker, who assured him that she had none.

"Just a plain walking coat and skirt, madame," said auntie, as the patterns were spread out.

She picked up a packet of serviceable dark materials as she spoke.

The bees made a simultaneous dive at some pretty summer styles.

Before the five minutes, which had put her in her place, had elapsed, they had caught up the phrases customary to the place.

"Don't look at that nasty stuff, auntie," protested Burton. "Look at this! A really pretty pattern, I call it!"

"Or this, auntie," urged Bob. "It would make up sweetly, when crimmed with lace."

"Auntie," put in Bennie, earnestly, "see this. I like the colour, and it is quite the latest thing."

"But, darlings!" protested the perplexed lady, glancing at the undeniably tasty lines of goods that were being forced upon her notice—"but, darlings, I don't want a summer dress this time. I want a strong useful coat and skirt. Those would n't be fit to go out walks with you."

"Why not, auntie? It's nicer to go out in pretty things than ugly ones."

"But they are n't the right kind of material, bees.

Those are linens, delaines, silks, and cottons. I want cloth—something like this, you know—something useful. Feel the difference. Those will not be warm enough."

The bees admitted the necessity for warmth, though not for plainness.

"But can't they be useful and warm and pretty as well?" they urged.

"Of course they can, dears!" said the dressmaker. "Now, look at this, ma'am. Very pretty, and will make up smartly."

"I like the tekshur," said Bennie, thoughtfully rubbing it between his fingers, as he had seen auntie do when she made the same remark.

Auntie put down her own soberer patterns and wavered. After all, why should n't she have the prettier thing? She had grown used to greys, slates, browns, and blacks; but there was really no reason why she should stick to them. Many women of far more than her age wore the smarter clothes—and that age did not feel so great as it had done before the arrival of the bees. The pretty rosy colour, which had come so often lately, flushed up into her cheeks again.

"I don't think I should object to that," she admitted, with a hankering after brightness and colour that she had thought gone forever.

"I am sure you would like it, ma'am," urged madame. "It would make a most fashionable costume. I made one exactly like it for Mrs. Rouse only last week."

The bees were all holding on to the pattern and examining it. Who did it, or how it happened, no one quite knew, but suddenly it shot along the table

with a force that carried it to the other side, and sent it on to the floor.

Three red faces were lifted. Burton voiced the opinion of all.

"Take it away! Our Auntie Bell is n't going to wear the same stuff as that old Rouse thing!"

"No, indeedums!" agreed his brothers.

"*Bees!*" ejaculated their horrified auntie.

But the bees were not quelled. "*Never!*" they said as one man.

Burton and Bob, one on each side, clasped a hand and bestowed a vigorous kiss upon it. Bennie—out of reach—clutched at a glove, and chivalrously pressed it to his lips.

Auntie tingled from head to foot—nearly as embarrassed as though they had been twenty years older.

"*Bees!*" she again protested; but it was but feebly. All the vigour had gone out of her tones.

"Show us something else!" commanded Burton.

Auntie collapsed. So did madame. Other patterns were brought forward. The rejected one lay where it had fallen. It is regrettable to have to state that Mrs. Rouse, who had the faculty of winning the dislike of anybody who had the misfortune to work for her, was known in that establishment henceforth by the opprobrious title Burton had bestowed.

At length a material was chosen which pleased all parties.

"And how will you have it made, ma'am?"

"Oh, you know my style," said auntie, feeling that she had about all she could stand at present.

"Just smart and nice," said Bob, encouragingly.

"Come along, bees!" she murmured, without countermanding the order.

"Auntie," said Bennie, looking wistfully at the soft pale green on which he had set his affections from the first, "I do wish you would have this. It would be so very shootable and becrumming to you."

Auntie admitted it. Bennie had taste. "But, dearie, I really don't require it; and another dress would be so expensive."

"Would it?" said Bennie. "I like it so very much. What do you say, doctor? How do you like it, captain?"

"Chick!" said the soldier, recalling a word of his mother's which had puzzled him, but which now seemed appropriate.

A sidelong glance at auntie showed that it was correct, even if amazing. As for madame, she was too much surprised at learning the status of her customers to take in the observation. A discreet assistant in the background, who had been struggling with her emotions for some time past, was nearly driven into hysterics.

"Captain! Sir Bennie!" The doctor scrambled from his chair, and a few minutes' earnest conversation followed.

Then the soldier came forward. "Auntie, if it's only 'cause it's too 'spensive, *we'll pay!*"

Six small hands dived into six small trouser pockets, and produced six pennies, which were clapped down upon the table. What could auntie say? She looked at the rosy, loving faces, and capitulated.

"Oh, thank you, bees! Very well, madame. Make up the green dress too."

Then they departed, the bees with their curly red heads held well up, and the complacent air of men who have done a generous thing by their women-folk, and know that they are only waiting for home and privacy before they will be kissed and thanked in the bewitching manner the dear creatures know so well how to assume, and which makes a fellow feel how pleasant it is to give them a treat, don't you know! even if pockets are empty afterwards.

Of course after this there was no leaving them at home when auntie went to be fitted. They accompanied her on every occasion, and their behaviour was absolutely correct. They knelt down, and laid their ruddy heads on the floor to see if the bottom of the skirt hung evenly. They smoothed a fold here and there, and then fell back to see the effect. They revolved slowly round her in order to criticise the general appearance. By this time they had learned to read her face like an open book, and regulated their praise or blame by the approval or disapproval they read there.

"Is n't that rather a bad crease, madame?" she asked, pointing out a defect.

But it so happened that to rectify what was wrong would cause a good deal of work, and madame tried to get out of it.

"Oh, it's not much, ma'am! And I think you'll find that when the pins are taken out, and it is well ironed, there will be nothing there about which to worry."

Auntie sighed, and mentally resigned herself to putting the matter right herself; but being one of those ladies who are afraid of their dressmakers she made no further remark.

But the bees were not afraid. Burton eyed the offending place for a few seconds, and then pointed a condemnatory finger at it.

"I don't like that creash, madame. Take it out, please."

Madame hesitated.

"Take it out!" commanded Burton again. "A creash like that spoils the fits."

Madame meekly obeyed.

"Perhaps it would be as well," she assented. "Does that look all right, ma'am?"

Reading satisfaction in auntie's expression as she assented, Burton nodded approval.

Auntie had never been so carefully fitted in her life. No shade of expression on her face escaped the bees' eagle glances, and once they commented on a defect madame found she had better attend to it. She could not stand the disgust of the six eyes.

Afterwards auntie never recalled those interviews without tingling all over, and mentally chuckling. Something in Burton's expression as he asked about her hat brought them to her mind now, and she relapsed into a brown study.

The little fellow soon recalled her.

"Auntie! The rakkleshedan, I s'pose?"

She glanced out of doors, where the rain was now coming down in sheets.

"Well, I think so, captain. You see it sticks on better than the others, and I shall not have a hand to spare to hold it. I have such a lot to do. If it were not that grandma ought to have some medicine I would n't venture this morning."

"'T is n't fit to turn a dog out," assented Burton.

"Why can't pretty hats hold on as well as ugly ones, auntie?"

"I don't know, Burt." She had long ago been permitted the privilege, hitherto accorded to no one but themselves, of shortening or lengthening their names as she pleased. "But somehow they don't. Don't you love me as well in old things as in new?"

The bees dropped their various avocations, and clasped her in a threefold embrace.

"We love you in *anything*, my precious!" shouted Burton.

"Or *everything*, sweet darling?" said Bob.

"Or *nothing*, dear love!" added Bennie, endeavouring, successfully, to out-do his brothers.

"But," went on Burton, when the first ebullition of affection was over, "we don't *demire* you so much, auntie."

And she was obliged to admit the justice of this remark. Work was resumed.

"Boots, auntie?" said Bob from the wardrobe, where he was rummaging. "They will be more likely to keep your feet dry than shoes."

"I 'll take your advice, doctor."

"Auntie, these gloves really are on their last legs," observed Bennie, bringing out a pair that had seen their best days. "I think you 'd better wear your second best."

"Very well, Sir Bennie. No doubt you are right."

"I 'd fasten your dress up with your s'penders," said the thoughtful doctor. "It won't show under the macky, and the mud will be aborible in the lane."

Bennie mounted a chair and held the cloak, and all three assisted in buttoning it.

"Now I think you 'll do!" they assured her. "Don't be longer than you can help, auntie! We will be ever so good; and as you won't have us to talk to on the way you might as well be thinking of another tale. And you'd better start at once, 'cause the rain is n't so bad now. Here's the string bag."

Thus adjured and dismissed she started on her way, and if she did n't exactly follow their advice in the matter of the tale, at all events the remembrance of their assistance and love cheered her greatly as she splashed her way through the muddy roads and struggled with the wind.

And she had need of all the cheering she could get, for the shopping proved a most unpleasant affair. Everything seemed to go wrong. Grandma's medicine was not ready, and she had to leave it and promise to call again, and it took her considerably out of her way to do so. Everything she wanted appeared to be just out of stock, or out of fashion, or "we have ceased keeping it, madam"; and she had to go from place to place. And, to crown all, half-a-dozen times she had to fly to the nearest shelter, and stand watching the rain sweep down the streets. By the time she had finished, her arms were crammed with awkward-shaped bundles, not to mention that the string bag was also full and heavy, and her mind felt as tired and bedraggled as her body.

But misfortunes had not ceased. She had left the shops behind, and there was n't a place in which to take refuge, when down came the rain once more. To be sure Mrs. Rouse lived close at hand. But Mrs. Rouse was not a lady who cared to receive damp and

dripping friends. She was one of those who look another way when one is in distress. Therefore auntie's surprise equalled her gratitude when a vigorous rapping at a window attracted her attention, and she was beckoned in.

"How very kind of Lucy!" she thought, hurrying up the path and reaching the porch just as the front door was opened and a gay voice greeted her:

"You poor dear! What a sight you look! Come in!"

"I feel a sight!" laughed Bell. "No, I won't come in, thank you. I shall only make a mess. I'll stand here till the worst is over, and then run for the car."

"Nonsense! You will do nothing of the kind. You will come in, and have a cup of tea—never mind if it is morning; tea is always refreshing, and you look quite chilled. I have a fire, too, Bell."

Bell hesitated. She would have preferred to go as soon as possible, but it seemed ungrateful to refuse in the face of such hospitality—so unlike Lucy, too! so she reluctantly entered, allowed her to take the dripping umbrella and cloak, and followed to a small cheery sitting-room, still protesting.

"See what a poor drowned rat I've rescued from the storm, Mr. Coverdale," said Mrs. Rouse, with a pretty little laugh.

A sudden mist swept before Bell's eyes, and for a moment everything was blurred, as a tall figure came forward to greet her. Lucy's unwonted kindness was explained. Then pride came to her aid, and she shook hands quietly, acutely conscious, nevertheless, that she had forgotten to let down the back of her dress, that her skirts and boots were muddy, and with

a vague suspicion—founded on fact—that the "rakkleshedan," as Burton had disrespectfully called her hat, was rakishly cocked on one side, and a strand of her hair had escaped its moorings.

"It is n't a fit day for you to be out!" exclaimed Mr. Coverdale, drawing up a chair to the fire for her.

"Business must be done," said Bell, steadily, as she sank down, glad, at all events, to hide the shortened skirt.

"But indeed it is n't fit!" chimed in Mrs. Rouse. "A horrid day! And you look tired out. Put your feet on that stool, Bell, and make yourself comfortable."

"No, thank you! I am not so done up as all that!" protested Miss Burnham, who was hiding her disreputable boots under her dress.

But she was not allowed to escape. "You must, Bell! I insist upon it! I am sure you would feel easier. Push it forward, Mr. Coverdale!"

There was no help for it! Bell placed her muddy wet feet on the stool in question, finding a grim satisfaction in the knowledge that its pristine loveliness was ruined for ever.

It was too bad of Lucy! Why was she so unkind? What object did it serve to exhibit her thus?

Though Mr. Coverdale chatted pleasantly, she quite realised that—like the bees—he did not "demire" her that day.

And what if he did n't? Why should she care? Surely she was old enough to have done with follies of that kind!

But a woman has to be very old before she can see,

with indifference, admiration fade from eyes that have once held it.

To make matters worse, Lucy was looking remarkably well in her pretty dress, and with her bright manner. Bell realised to the full what a capital foil she made. She also realised how dull and uninteresting she was in the conversation that followed; how heavy, in comparison with the vivacity which made men speak of Mrs. Rouse as "such a charming little woman!" And the knowledge made her as happy and comfortable as such knowledge always does!

But on whatsoever subject a conversation was started Mrs. Rouse was seldom unable to draw it round to herself, her belongings, and her doings; and in the present case she was soon describing her woes at a photographer's, where she and her son had spent an hour lately.

"But it really turned out very well, after all, Bell. Will you bring the photo to me, Mr. Coverdale? You know where it is in the other room."

And he strolled off, leaving the impression that he was emphatically tame cat about the house. Which impression—only couched in more elegant language—was the very one Mrs. Rouse wished to convey, and for which the photo had been dragged on the tapis.

"Poor fellow!" she whispered. "He is so very lonely and dull, and so pleased to be welcomed in a home again. I have n't the heart to refuse to let him come when he wishes, even though it is n't always convenient."

"Oh!" said Miss Burnham, with complete comprehension in her mind, and an absolute lack of it in her face.

"I think lodgings are wretched for a man, especially when he is not well. I told him so, and he is so grateful for any kindness."

"Ah!" said Miss Burnham. Lucy, compassionate and sympathetic, was not unknown to her.

"And my Egerton is *so* fond of him!" simpered the lady.

"Um!" said Miss Burnham. Egerton had been *so* fond of men before.

Mrs. Rouse looked at her with irritation. Surely Bell was growing stupid as she grew older! Why on earth did n't she understand, and not look so politely uninterested?

But the frown cleared like magic as she effusively thanked for the photo.

"I am just telling my friend how interested my little Egerton is in you, Mr. Coverdale. He is always asking about your adventures, in that far-away land. He does not usually take to people. I suppose you must have a knack of winning children's affection."

"If I have, it is quite unconsciously. I know nothing of them. Are your jolly little bees fond of me, Miss Burnham?"

There was something a trifle quizzical in his smile. Bell brightened. Even the mention of her sturdy champions brought a feeling of ease she had not experienced since entering the house.

"I am sorry to be unpolite," she laughed; "but I must admit I have never heard them mention your name."

Mr. Coverdale laughed too; but before he could reply there was a clatter on the stairs and a sound of noisy footsteps.

"Oh, Egerton, do come back!" pleaded an anxious voice. "Your mother will be vexed!"

"Shan't! Shan't!" came in a vigorous roar.

"It's my naughty boy!" observed Mrs. Rouse, with a complacent smile. "He has such a spirit! No one can manage him. I suppose he must have heard that you are here," she smiled at Mr. Coverdale.

But the heir to the house of Rouse crashed open the door, and, ignoring his mother and her earlier visitor, rushed up to Miss Burnham.

"Where are the bees?" he shouted. "Why have n't you brought them to play with me? I want the bees! Where are they?"

The four boys had met on several occasions. So far auntie had not heard that her nephews cared for Egerton. Apparently this lack of interest was not mutual.

"They are at home. It is too wet for them to come out."

"Don't be rude, Egerton!" said his mother.

Egerton broke off his renewed clamours to stare at Miss Burnham. "Your hair 's coming down!" he shouted. "There 's a long tail hanging out!"

"Don't be rude, Egerton!" admonished his mother again; but there was more amusement than rebuke in her tone.

"I 'm not rude!" he roared. "I 'm kind! The bees say it 's an honour to have an Auntie Bell who can swim and do things like she can; and she would n't like to go out with her hair that way. I 'm kind to her. I 'm not rude!"

Auntie Bell blushed crimson, but, realising that

the boy's intention had been excellent, even though his mode of carrying it out was scarcely to be commended, smiled at him, and took the opportunity to fasten the offending lock, and to straighten the rattleshed at the same time.

"Why don't the bees come and play with me?" demanded Egerton. "Why don't I have the honour of a Auntie Bell? I want a honour, and a Auntie Bell, mother!"

"That will do!" said Mrs. Rouse, sharply. "Do take him away, Miss Smith! When the bees came to play with you before, you quarrelled all the time. Go away at once, and don't be naughty!"

"They would n't play, 'cause they said I was n't fair, and cheated," protested the boy. "Why do I cheat, mother? I want to be like the bees! I want not to cheat, and to have a Auntie Bell!"

"Leave the room, Egerton!" commanded his mother, secretly more angry with her son than she had ever been in her life. "Miss Smith!"

And he was hauled away, filling the air with the angry shrieks of a passionate, spoiled child. "Why do I cheat? Why do you let me cheat, mother? I want the bees! I want a Auntie Bell, and not to cheat!"

The voice gradually died in the distance, and for the first time Bell felt pity and compassion for the poor child who was so surely being ruined, and who was already beginning to feel that his little companions looked down upon him. Then she glanced at Lucy, and saw from her expression that she was in for a bad quarter of an hour.

If only her bees had been there!

CHAPTER XII

THE COPPER

MEANWHILE the bees were longing for auntie quite as much as she was longing for them.

As soon as she had gone they had looked round for amusement.

"Can we go in the akits, Minnie?" inquired Bennie.

Minnie said "no" to her favourites only when stern duty required; and, it must be admitted, not always even then. So, on the present occasion, the request being innocent, she naturally hastened to give permission.

"Of course you can, darlings!"

"I s'pose you could n't come and play, Minnie dear?" insinuated Burton.

"Well, no, Master Bee. I really ought n't till the work is done. Perhaps I can later in the day."

And they parted the best of friends.

Grandpa's house was far too large for his family, and many of the rooms were closed and never used. The bees found the neglected upper storey a good playground, and, provided overalls were donned, they were permitted to go there at their pleasure.

On the present occasion they played for some time and then Burton made a discovery. "It's stopped raining."

"'T won't stop for long," remarked Bennie.

"No, daresay not. Shall we run out for a breath of fresh air in the yard?"

"Yes, let 's!" said the doctor. "That old hen who wears trousers seemed a bit poorly yesterday. I'd like to see how she is getting on."

So out they went, just as the front door bell rang.

"I wonder who it is!" said Burton. "It can't be auntie yet."

They could hear Minnie ushering a visitor into the sitting-room which faced the yard. Beneath this room was a wash-cellar half sunk underground, the window of which fell back a little way—the extent of the bow above. In front of this window, which on the present occasion was half open, was a narrow grating.

The bees stared up at the room above them, and then, unwisely, gave way to curiosity. Bringing a wooden chair and a couple of stools from the kitchen, they piled them up, and Burton scrambled to the top, which brought his eyes, when he stood on tip-toe, above the level of the sill.

Next moment he was down again, with such an expression of horror on his face that it scarcely needed the "Master Burton, come here!" uttered in a well-known voice, to make the others simultaneously gasp, "*Nurse!*"

Nurse! And their unfailing refuge in times of trouble had gone to town and left them to their fate! They were helpless! Piteously they looked at one another, and then round for a chance—a bare chance of escape!

In this emergency Burton's eye fell on the wash-house.

"Come on!" he panted.

The amount of space between the grating and the window was but small, but the bees were not large people, and could, when occasion demanded, compress themselves considerably. Occasion demanded now. They could hear nurse above saying, "Come here! Dear me, where are those naughty children?"

From where she stood she could not see them, but it would not take long to run through the passage and out at the back door, and then they would be captured without hope of rescue. They squeezed through, and dropped into the space beneath—rather an awkward drop, too; but the bees would have negotiated worse places than that in their fear—and crawled through the open window and on to a sink below. In spite of their haste they lingered to shut the window behind them and pull the latch, and so cover their traces. Then they looked for a hiding-place. Only one met their anxious eyes. Scrambling along the sink and over a stone slab next to it, they stood on the edge a huge old-fashioned copper, used for boiling clothes. As it happened, Minnie had been about to clean it when the door bell rang, and for that purpose had partially filled it with warm water. Left to themselves, Bennie or Bob would have hesitated to plunge into that dark hole, the bottom of which could not be seen, and therefore might be of any depth. But Burton had no hesitation, and where their leader went there would the other two follow. In two minutes from the time they had first discovered the presence of the enemy, the frightened, miserable little fellows were sitting cross-legged on the rounded bottom of the copper, with the water nearly up to their chins. As

their red heads did not rise above the level of the top, to the casual observer the cellar was void of living beings.

They listened to signs of the chase. Nurse had a voice which would pierce through most things, and in her indignation Minnie spoke much louder than usual, so they heard fragments.

"I tell you, girl, I saw Master Burton as plainly as I see you! Do you think I 'm blind?"

"That 's for you to say. For they are all three playing up in the attic as good as gold; bless their little hearts!"

A silence.

Then: "Now are you satisfied? And look! there is the chair and stools on which he stood to look in!"

How the bees regretted their curiosity! And yet, had it not been for that they might have been taken in the rear, before they even guessed the presence of the foe. Perhaps all had been for the best.

"Then where are they?" demanded Minnie. "Oh! where can they be? They must have run out into the fields!"

"I tell you, girl, they did not! Was n't I standing at the window? What is that place?"

The bees' hair stood on end.

"The wash-cellar. Is it that they 've slipped through the grating that you 're meaning?" demanded Minnie, intending sarcasm.

Now was proved the benefit of caution in covering their flight. Had the window been open, nurse, who had more experience of their ways than Minnie, might have suspected; but with it not only shut, but latched, she relinquished the idea. Nurse was an

obtuse woman. It never struck her that a window being fastened did not prove that people could not be *inside*.

"No, I 'm not!" she said angrily. "Do you think I 'm an idiot, girl?"

"That 's for you to say," said Minnie again.

The voices died away, and silence and desolation fell on the inhabitants of the copper. At first it was rather interesting to be sitting in water with all their clothes on, and they found by cautious splashing they could make bubbles, which they blew from one to another; but the bubbles had little stamina, and always broke. They then tried washing the solitary handkerchief they possessed at the time between the three, but it was soon done, and what was the good of washing when they could n't go out into the yard and peg it on the line? Burton found a bit of wood in his pocket, which they set afloat and played with for some time, but at length everything failed, and the dismal little faces stared at each other.

"I wish Auntie Bell would come," said Bennie, trying to choke down a sob.

"She will soon, Sir Bennie. Cheer up!" said the soldier.

It was plucky of him to try and encourage them by recalling their standing in life. But support from titles, if not backed up by anything more tangible, is but a broken reed, and wretchedness and despair fell upon them.

During this time Minnie was seeking everywhere. As soon as she discovered the identity of her visitor her last remnant of respect vanished, and so impertinent did she become, in her anxiety, that nurse was

driven to declaring that not one minute more would she spend in that house, and "Your mistress shall hear of your conduct, girl!"

"Good riddance of bad rubbish!" retorted the tormented Minnie. "Drop the latch after you, and then I need n't be bothered to come to the door. Oh, my precious lambs! Where can they be?"

She flung an apron over her head, and ran out into the rain to look down the fields. Had the bees, in their terror, rushed off to town after Auntie Bell, clad in their overalls, and with no hats on their darling red heads, and only house-shoes on their dear little feet? Or were they wandering the soaking fields, drenched and frightened? Or perhaps the hen-house? The last was worth investigating; but after terrifying the feathered inhabitants nearly out of their wits Minnie again went to the back-yard gate, and called:

"Master Bees! Master Bees, darlings! Come home! It's only Minnie! She's gone! Bees!"

No reply.

Another idea. Rushing back, she caught up a whistle, and sent out a long shrill note, which made Pollen—lying in his water-butt kennel, with his nose on his paws, and wishing the rain would stop, and his young masters come and play with him—prick up his ears. Was it—could it be an invitation? Again came the whistle, and the dog leapt to its feet, and bounded down to the stream. Half wading, half swimming, he crossed, paused a second to shake himself, and raced up the field, to be greeted by the distracted Minnie.

"Find them, good dog! Find the bees!" she

urged, pointing out the spot where they had last been seen. "Hist! Poll! Seek, lad!"

The sagacious animal smelt about for a moment, and then made a dead set against the wash-house window. But the drop, which had been difficult for three frightened small boys, was impossible for the dog, especially considering the fact that the window was now shut.

His sagacity was not treated with the respect it deserved.

"Find them, Poll! Seek, lad! Oh, don't be an idiot! Leave that window alone! The bees, Poll!"

But Poll would only scrape at the grating and whine excitedly, and, bestowing an undeserved kick upon him, Minnie once more sought the attics, wondering if they could by any means have escaped her notice.

And this was the harrowing tale that greeted Auntie Bell when she returned, tired, wet, and dispirited.

Her own troubles were forgotten instantly. She could not blame Minnie, who wailed her repentance.

"I ought to have looked after them better. My blessed, blessed boys!"

"Nonsense! It was n't your fault; and they can't be far!" said auntie, endeavouring to speak cheerfully, though secretly sore dismayed. Where could they have gone? Had it not been for the weather she would have felt small anxiety. The bees would return when they thought the danger over. But if they were wandering in the wet, who could say what harm might follow?

"Come and look at the place, mum, where they last stood," Minnie said, leading the way to that sacred spot. Auntie followed. Poll, who had laid himself

down, and was watching the wash-house window, greeted her with a short bark.

He was hailed with joy. "Find them, Poll! Find them!"

"Don't speak to him, mum!" said the disgusted Minnie, aiming a second kick at him. "Not a thing will he do but scratch at that grating. Gawmless brute!"

But auntie grasped the notion, and, unable to effect an entry by way of the window, ran down-stairs, calling, "Bees! bees! Where are you, my bees?" determined to seek every nook and cranny in the place. But there was no need.

At the first sound of that beloved voice there arose a threefold sobbing wail of "Auntie! auntie! auntie!"

The trio endeavoured to rise to their feet, and the natural result followed. Slipping on the rounded bottom, as they tried to straighten their stiffened limbs, all three disappeared under water in turn.

Horried, auntie rushed forward, and, stretching out her arms, clasped the weeping, miserable, little objects as they struggled to the surface. "Oh, my precious bees!" she cried.

But if she held them, her hold was as nothing to the clasp with which they greeted her. Each boy clutched with the grasp of despair any part of her he could. Slipping and stumbling, and unable to get any foothold, they clung round her neck and arms till she was nearly as soaked as themselves, and quite unable to do anything more than prevent them again falling, while choking seemed imminent.

In this emergency she shouted for aid: "Minnie! Minnie!"

And down raced the faithful Minnie, and the equally faithful Poll, in a tangled heap that, fortunately, did not end in disaster. On beholding the picture both exclaimed, according to their separate natures.

"Bees!" pleaded auntie, "I can't possibly lift you all out at once. Let go, darlings! just for one moment!"

But they were beyond listening to reason. Safety, love, and protection were within their grasp, and they intended to cling to them.

"Captain, you will be brave, and let me lift the others out first!"

But Burton did not respond to this appeal to his soldierly courage. On the contrary, he basely deserted his calling.

"I 'm not a captain!" he sobbed. "I won't be one! I'll be a little bee, and stay with you for always and ever, auntie!"

"Bennie, you let go!"

But Bennie was equally unreasonable. "I don't want to tumble under the water again. It is n't nice to have water all over your face and down your mouth!" he wailed.

"Well, then, Bob!" said auntie, making a last appeal, which was also fruitless.

"I've got you, auntie! I've got you!" was the only reply vouchsafed.

Minnie came to the rescue, and succeeded by chance where entreaty and command had failed.

"Come along, Master Burton, my blessing!" she said, grasping the nearest child, who happened to be Bob. Minnie was by no means certain yet of identity.

So ingrained was the habit of answering to the

wrong name that Bob's arms involuntarily relaxed their hold, and instantly Minnie had him out, and planted him—a wretched, dripping, sobbing little object—on the floor, where Poll whined sympathy, overwhelmed him with caresses, and endeavoured to lick away the fast-falling tears.

With assistance the other two were speedily beside their brother.

"Minnie, run up-stairs, and get a hot bath ready before the kitchen fire as quickly as you can," urged auntie.

But the bees had had enough of water.

"Don't want to bath!" they said in chorus.

"We 've been bathing for hours and hours!" sobbed Burton.

"For years!" wept Bennie.

"For shenturies!" wailed the veracious Bob, going one better.

But their expostulations were ignored. Auntie picked up the nearest lump of sopping misery and hurried up-stairs.

"I'll come back for you, darlings!" she promised.

But they held on to her skirts and accompanied her, shedding cataracts of water and tears.

The fright, the long despair, and this last horror of half drowning had broken them down completely, and they wept at everything. It was not to be wondered at; but it did not make auntie's and Minnie's work less difficult.

The bath was soon ready, and Minnie's clean kitchen was a sight to behold.

Auntie seized upon Bob, and began unfastening the knotted tapes and buttons as quickly as possible, while

the small doctor protested piteously against the suggested treatment.

"Have been soaking for ever so long! Must be clean now!"

"But you 'll feel so much more comfy when you are dry and warm, and have a nice nightgown on, Bobbie!"

And events proved her words. A momentary gleam of sunshine followed, only to be dispersed by the next suggestion.

"You shall have a basin of bread and milk, and then go to bed for an hour."

"Don't want to go to bed!" wept the three. "It is n't night yet!"

"You 'll feel worlds better after a nap. Look at this nice bread and milk. I will change my wet clothes, and then one of you shall sit on my lap and eat it, and one on Minnie's, and the other must be a man and have a chair."

On her return fresh tribulation followed. All wanted to sit on auntie's lap; no one cared a fraction for Minnie's; and as for the chair, it was repudiated with scorn.

Poor little fellows! They were hardly to be blamed for their fretfulness, but auntie began to think it was time discipline was maintained.

"I have n't three laps, bees. Don't cry any more, but say who is going to be brave and give up."

No one would be brave, no one would give up; all would sit on her lap.

"Then no one will. Minnie, bring three stools. The bees will sit there."

So grave was auntie's voice that the tears ceased as

if by magic, and the trio cast anxious glances at their offended goddess.

"Did you have a Auntie Bell to take care of you when you were a little girl?" insinuated Bennie, hoping to mollify.

"No; grandma took care of me."

"I don't think much of that old grandma thing!" observed Burton, intending to point out their superior lot.

Auntie felt obliged to protest. This phrase, which she had now discovered was one generally used when the bees wished to express dislike, must be forbidden.

"That 's not polite, Burton!"

"I don't feel polite, auntie!" remarked the candid soldier. "I feel cross! I feel cross all over! The back of my neck feels cross, and my elbows feel cross, and my knees are as cross as two sticks!" Secretly auntie did n't wonder.

"But people ought to try and not show it. It's cowardly."

There was a pause.

"When persons feel cross, auntie, don't you think it would make them feel heaps better if they could give somebody 'what for'—not 'cause they're angry with that somebody, but just to 'lieve their feelings?"

Auntie marvelled where the child had learnt his expression, but answered to the point:

"I do, Burton. Heaps better! Do you mean I may give you 'what for'?"

The spoons dropped with a clatter, the scared little faces were raised. What was the matter? What had happened? Were earthquakes about?

"But you 're not cross, auntie?" said Bob, tremulously.

"I am, Bob; very cross! I have had a horrid walk in the rain; everything has gone wrong; I am cold and tired—and you three have sopped me. I'm *very* cross!"

"Auntie," said Burton, "I b'lieve I'd like to go to bed after all!"

"It would do me worlds of good! I feel it!" said Bob.

"Bed in the daytime would be fun!" added Bennie.

The quavering voices went to auntie's heart. But she maintained her grave expression.

"That is right. Now, who will walk up-stairs, and who will be carried—though you are big boys for that, are n't you?"

The bees protested they would all prefer to walk. They would n't trouble Minnie, and they could n't think of troubling auntie.

That lady felt decidedly sore at this sudden rejection of her services, till, glancing at the anxious faces, she realised the situation.

They laid their curly red heads on the pillows, and breathed hard in the desire to woo slumber and show their obedience. Auntie smiled to herself. She must not allow her bonny bees to become spoiled.

The hour that followed, during which the children slept, was one of anxiety to auntie. Pneumonia, pleurisy, bronchitis, and consumption in turns passed through her mind. She looked at the half-hidden crimson cheeks, and hectic flushes came before her; she felt the small hands, and alternately dreaded cold sweats and the parched dryness of fever. If they showed the slightest sign of illness when they awoke,

the doctor should be summoned. And Minnie was a Job's comforter.

"Pneumony it turned out to be, mum. And him not in the water half the time of them blessed children. And ended in galloping consumption, or decline, or both."

But she forgot to mention that the water in question was under ice, and that the unfortunate had been half drowned first, and neglected afterwards.

Auntie was in the room when at length Bob opened his eyes and sat up, surveying her solemnly.

"How do you feel, dearie?"

The gentleman had never been asked how he felt before, but his recollection brought to mind the correct answer. Grandpa had said it, so it must be right.

"Oh, just so-so, auntie. A bit seedy and run down."

Auntie was too harassed to recognise the mimicry.

"Have you a pain, darling?"

Bob was a conscientious youth. He was not conscious of pain, but if auntie wanted him to have one he would do his best.

"Where, auntie?"

"Anywhere, Bob. In the chest?"

"Which side?"

But before he could harrow her further Burton and Bennie roused. They looked at her doubtfully, instead of leaping from their beds to embrace her according to their usual custom. Was she friends again? But auntie had forgotten about those differences of opinion, and became more alarmed than ever at this quietude.

She endeavoured to tempt their appetites.

"Would you like some bread and milk, bees?"

They shook their heads.

"Or some gruel?"

But gruel did not appeal to them.

"Not if I let you have a lot of sugar in it?"

But even this was of no avail.

The symptoms were dreadful.

"What would you like, then?" she asked, with a sinking heart.

The small boys brightened.

"An egg, auntie!" coaxed Burton. "A whole egg each—not just a half!"

"And some cocoa, auntie," said Bob. "Real cocoa—not nearly all milk."

"Oh, and, auntie! some toast—hot toast!" said Bennie, breathless with the thought of the feast.

Auntie looked at the blazing eyes and beaming faces, and a load was lifted from her mind.

"If you will get up and dress, I'll go and tell Minnie to get it ready."

For the remainder of the day the bees had a royal time. They ate a prodigious meal; they played games—such games; they listened to tales; and they even stayed up an hour later to make up for that one spent in sleep. But at length came the summons: "Now, bed!"

"Catch us first, auntie!" suggested Burton.

"Very well. But when I have caught you, you must promise to go off at once."

What an auntie it was! What a pearl among aunties! They laughed gleefully, and prepared, under those conditions, to stay up till midnight; for

grown-ups cannot run like small boys—not even such a treasure of a grown-up as they possessed.

They pranced off to a little distance, for fear of an unexpected swoop, and listened to the rules laid down.

"Anything is fair, bees—any trick or dodge, you know."

"Not to get Minnie to help you," they urged.

"Oh no! I'll catch you by myself."

The bees danced excitedly. Would she!

"But as soon as I have caught one he must go straight to bed."

"Oh, auntie! Let's stop and see the fun. We'll go as quick as lightning afterwards, but it would be too trying to be in bed while the others were racing," coaxed Bennie, the far-seeing.

"So it would! Well, you can stay. But I shall not run after you again, you know. You will be out of the game."

"Oh, 'course, auntie! 'course! And can we go anywhere we like?"

"Not out of doors, and not into grandma's bedroom, or grandpa's study, or in the drawing-room. Now, are you ready? Off!"

With shrieks of laughter they bolted like arrows from a bow, with auntie after them. At first they divided. But the two who were not being chased found it slow work for one thing, and for another they nearly got heart disease at suddenly finding her in full swing round unexpected corners. No; it was safer, and better fun, to be together. Then, at all events, they knew where the danger was. There were two staircases in the house, and many of the rooms had two doors, so the opportunities were varied and

exciting. Going up-stairs auntie had the advantage. The bees' short legs could not possibly take two steps at a time, and they puffed and panted. But at the top the chaser always had to stop to get wind, while the chased took instant advantage. But it was down-stairs that was the bees' safeguard. Casting themselves astride the banisters, they slid from top to bottom, while auntie had to come down comparatively slowly by the steps. Even the jump of three or four at the bottom could not make up for lost time. And her nephews, seeing how she was handicapped, laughed and danced down below, and even ventured to urge her to greater exertions.

"Here we are, auntie! Here we are! Run faster!"

Twice they played this trick. But the third time was fatal. In her youthful days auntie had been a tomboy, and the memory of those days was growing green. As she approached the head of the stairs again she was nerving herself to a mighty resolution. Why should n't she? There was n't a soul to see but her nephews. She would!

And the astounded bees, turning, for the third time, to laugh and rejoice, beheld their revered relative fling herself on the banisters and swoop down—such a swoop! It was a grand finale. They were too much amazed even to attempt to fly for a moment, and that moment was fatal. Her arms were round all three, and they were captured.

But auntie had been mistaken in thinking that no one would see. A gentleman, tall and brown, was walking up the garden path. At the front door, which was standing open, he paused, just as the bees came flying down; and then followed that other amazing

spectacle. Realising that this was not a time for visitors, the gentleman backed away. He was done out of his call, but it did not seem to trouble him much, for all the way back to town he chuckled at intervals, and even stopped once or twice to indulge in a prolonged laugh.

Meanwhile the bees were certainly caught. But it was worth it. They would n't have lost that sight for permission to stay up two hours. *What* an auntie it was! Gentle and loving as a woman, courageous and active as a man, with an imagination worthy of a novelist—no novelist could tell such tales as she did—and a perfect encyclopædia of knowledge. And it was before this incarnation of all the virtues that they had shown themselves fretful and peevish children, after such a trifling accident as a short stay in a copper half filled with water. They blushed crimson with shame at the remembrance. And not a word of reproach had she uttered since their recovery! What generosity! In their anxiety to make amends they began to undress instantly, and by the time they arrived at their bedroom most of their upper garments were removed, and their lower ones required to be held on.

But when they were ready for bed they clambered round her, and put the question which was troubling their minds, though that exciting chase had driven it away for the time being.

"Auntie dear, do you think nurse came to take us away? You won't let us go, auntie, will you?"

The little arms clung tightly, the ruddy heads nestled against her.

"I don't think so, darlings! Father and mother are not coming home yet."

"Can't we stay with you when they do, auntie?" Burton begged. "We love you so very, very much!"

Auntie sighed, and hugged them. "You see, you belong to them, bees. You are not mine."

"Can't we belong ourselves to you instead, auntie?"

"I'm afraid not! But we won't bother about that. It may be a long, long time before they come back. Let us enjoy ourselves. Good-night!"

But when the bees were fast asleep, and auntie had eaten her supper, and locked up the house, and retired to her room, she sat down to think. She had been glad of the suggestion of the chase, glad of the little fellows' extra hour, glad, in fact, of anything that had kept her thoughts away from herself. But now she flung open her window, for the cold, stormy day had given place to a mild, starlit night, and, drawing up a chair, sat down, and stared out over the country.

She told herself that her bees were safe, that they were not drowned, which might so easily have happened had they tried to struggle out by themselves; nor did they show any symptom of harm, and therefore she ought to be very thankful, and not have a wish left unfulfilled on earth. But the fact of the matter was she had a good many wishes. She wished Lucy had not been so unkind. She wished she had not met Mr. Coverdale. She wished he had not seen her in her wet, untidy condition. And, most of all, she wished that she did n't wish these things.

Why had he come back, and why should his coming trouble her? She had felt sure that that old wound had healed, and not even left a scar. At least, she had never dared to look at it to see if it had, and, of course,

that came to the same thing. And, anyhow, it had happened so long ago. Her heart ought to have more sense than to ache at its age. It would n't have been so bad if it had n't been Lucy. But Lucy always got everything. The thoughts were not very coherent at this point. But the night looked darker. Everything looked darker.

Then came a slight sound, and with a start she turned, to find Bob standing in the doorway. How long he had been there she could not tell, but at her movement he ran across the room, and climbed on to her lap, his childish face full of sympathy for her trouble.

"Are you sorry, auntie? Are you sore and sorry, and all alone?" he whispered, with his arms round her neck and his rosy cheek close against hers.

To receive comfort from an adult would have been out of the question, even had there been anybody to offer it,—she would have angrily denied the need,—but from this innocent little fellow, who asked no questions as to cause, and could not have understood had she told him, she could accept consolation, and admit that, in childish language, she was "sore and sorry."

She clasped him as he murmured the loving words she used to him in his little sorrows, and then, wrapping him up, held him in her arms, feeling the trouble grow lighter because of his affection.

After all it had been a mistake—a mistake to be put on one side and hidden—but scarcely one of which to be ashamed—though ashamed she was. She tried to be just, even to herself, and admitted that had it not been for that fatal letter, which had somehow changed the shy girlish liking into something warmer and

deeper, though she might have suffered at the time, the suffering would soon have passed—have been buried, for the sake of pride. But that letter, false though it had been, had, for a few hours, been believed to be true; and a very few hours are enough to change a whole life. She could not blame herself much, nor would she blame him.

It had been a mistake—only a mistake. But many lives have been spoiled through mistakes, and hers was only one of the many. And it was only spoiled, not ruined. There was plenty of happiness still, although not the special kind which, for a few short hours, she had believed to be hers.

She smiled to herself, though a trifle sadly. Here she was, a regular old maid, dreaming, like a girl, over past joys, and bemoaning them, instead of thanking Heaven, as she had done only a few weeks ago, for the pleasure and happiness of owning, for a time, three loving little red-headed bees.

She looked down, and started as she met the blue eyes.

"Why, Bobbie, I thought you were asleep, darling."

"No, auntie. I'm awake—wide awake!" he asserted, struggling with the heavy eyelids that would droop. "It's so lonely to be sore and sorry all alone, auntie; so very lonely!"

She gathered him up closely. "But I feel better now, Bobbie. I am going to carry you back to bed, and then undress myself."

Satisfied with this assurance, the little fellow gave up the fight, and was fast asleep before she could even take him into the next room.

Why he had come she did not know, nor whether

he remembered his midnight visit the next day. He said nothing, nor did he ever in the future refer to it. But Auntie Bell admitted to herself that night, for the first time, that if she had a preference for one of the bees, from the very first it had been for the little doctor.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EGG THIEF

IT was night. By turns the moon shone brilliantly and retired behind clouds. The hour was late. Far too late for three small boys to be standing at their bedroom window, clad only in their nightgowns. Bennie was the chief culprit. At least, really it was the moon's fault, for if she had n't been shining so brightly when he half woke, nothing of this would have happened. As it was he thought it was day, so scrambled out of bed to see what the weather was like.

After a few moments' blinking he realised his mistake, and was about to wander back again when something caught his eye.

For a moment he paused, then his "Bees!" roused his brothers and brought them flying to his side.

"What is it, Ben?"

"Look! There! Under those trees! Oh, bother! the moon has gone in! Wait a bit! Now! Do you see?"

"A man!" said Burton.

Yes, only a man. But what was a man doing crossing their field at that time of night? What was he doing hiding under trees, waiting till the moon went behind clouds before passing open spaces and slinking behind hedges?

The same idea struck all three at once, and Burton uttered the dread suspicion.

"The egg thief!"

For days past auntie had commented on the fewness of the eggs that could be found, and had given it as her opinion that some one must be stealing them. And now they had discovered him, if not in the very act, at least on his way to commit it! It was the thief, they felt no doubt of it, who was coming across that field, and doing his best to hide from observation. A thief! The bees' flesh crawled with horror at the bare idea! A man who stole eggs when auntie was n't looking! What would he be like if only they could see him closely? Would he have his wickedness marked on his face? Surely he could not be like other men!

"We must be quite sure first," said Bob the just. "It won't do to make any mistake."

Closer he came, and closer, and now he was hidden behind the wall that surrounded the back garden.

"The gate's locked," whispered Bennie.

Not that he expected a locked gate to be any barrier—they were indifferent to it themselves—but the silence was so painful that it was necessary to say something.

Then a head rose into sight, making three hearts leap in three breasts. Next moment he was over, and had dropped into the garden. But he did not, as the bees expected, stop at the hen-house. He ran up the path and disappeared. The listening small boys heard a sound that made their hair rise on their heads. It was only a gentle creak; but that creak came from the back door. The egg thief must have entered the house!

"We must go and tell auntie," said Burton, tremulously.

The two nodded assent.

Certainly auntie must know! But no one suggested that her presence would be comforting, that her loving arms round them would most likely remove that empty feeling from their little bodies which hitherto they had associated with a desire for something to eat. Yes, she must know; but how to get to her! An expedition to her room showed the bed unoccupied. She had not yet come up-stairs, and how dare they traverse those long passages and staircase?

The gallant little soldier led the way; it never entered into his mind to shirk his rightful position of leader, but his brothers were close behind. The bees usually carried out their plans. The soldier dare not be the first to admit fear; dogged Bob always stuck to his determination; and Bennie struggled against owning to terror when the others did not. They pressed closely against the wall. Not for worlds would they have put their hands on the banisters! Who could tell whether another hand—that of the egg thief—would not stretch up out of the darkness and clutch theirs? Even as it was they kept their wide-open eyes in that direction, fearing to see a long arm come through and grasp at their bare feet. To add to their troubles the staircase lamp had gone out. What a long way it was! What a very long way! Surely the stairs had increased in number since the daylight! Surely they could not be the same ones down which they were accustomed to scamper, making nothing of them!

At length the corner was turned, and the dimly lit hall brought hope. Their bare feet made no noise as they moved softly along. Where was *she*? Where could she be? There was no light in the sitting-room, or in the drawing-room, or in the kitchen. The only place that seemed to have occupants was grandpa's study, and that was forbidden ground, save by special invitation. They could hear him speaking loudly and angrily, and then grandma's fretful voice, and another which they did not know. Cautiously they peeped in, and comfort settled down upon their little souls. She was there—their loved one! They could not get to her, but a single cry would bring her flying to their help. And that point being settled they peeped again, wondering what grandpa was angry about now, and with whom. Their eyes fell on the stranger, and their hearts leaped anew. It must be the egg thief. Auntie Bell must have caught him all by herself, and hauled him in for grandpa to punish. Was there *anything* that she could n't do! And then the man turned, so that they caught a glimpse of his face.

It was Uncle Philip!

Into the bees' minds stole a vague recollection of another interview which they had interrupted long ago. They seemed to recognise grandpa's angry voice and Uncle Philip's sullen one. The words, too, were alike. It seemed to be a continuation of the former scene.

"I warned you, sir, that it was your last chance. You don't appear to have taken that warning to heart, but I mean it; and now you may help yourself. I've done with you!"

"You won't enjoy seeing your son in the dock, sir."

"I shall not! But I have spent all the time and money I can afford. Let us hope that prison life may effect what I have been unable to do."

"I am innocent."

"I have heard that tale before."

"I give you my word, sir!"

"And what guarantee have I of your veracity? Unfortunately, Philip, your word is not worth that!"

There was pain as well as anger in the stern voice; and the snap of grandpa's finger and thumb made the bees jump. It was very clever! How had he done it?

Grandma broke into fretful weeping, but the bees were accustomed to her tears, and thought nothing of them. Grandma always cried. Auntie Bell stood by her, softly patting her shoulder.

The voices sank lower, and the children outside waited, and longed for help. Every now and then they peeped in to be quite sure that *she* was still there. Why did n't Uncle Philip go, and let her come out to them? They listened to the conversation, and pieced it together in childish fashion, with gradually increasing dismay. Uncle Philip had been naughty, very naughty! worse than an egg thief! And now some wicked people were after him who wanted to put him in prison, and he had run away, and was begging grandpa to hide him, and grandpa would n't. Of course he would n't! Uncle Philip might have known that! Did he ever let people off when they had been naughty!

What a long, long time they went on talking! If only they could get back to bed and go to sleep! But

to go up that dark staircase again by themselves was more than their courage could contemplate. They must wait till auntie came out.

Suddenly a knock at the front door made everybody start. Grandma uttered a scream, and Uncle Philip gave a wild look round, and turned to leave the room. For a moment discovery seemed inevitable, and then the bees caught sight of a hiding-place. Hanging from pegs in the passage were various coats and mackintoshes, and behind these they slipped, just as Uncle Philip came out, followed by auntie. They hurried along the passage, and the bees, peeping in dismay after their departing friend, saw her thrust something into his hand which he received with a sullen nod. The haggard, miserable figure disappeared into the darkness, and again came that faint creak which told that the back door had been open and shut. Surely, surely, she was not deserting them! Surely auntie was not going out into the night, and leaving them in that lonely passage! Lumps rose in little throats, and hands clutched at each other. But no! Here she was returning! They would run to her! But again came the knock at the front door, and this time grandpa strode out of the room and answered it himself.

A gentleman came in; one whom the bees had never seen before, and the two went into the room, accompanied by auntie. And they had had no opportunity of catching hold of her dress as she passed.

Again followed a long wait. The gentleman and grandpa talked, but the bees could not hear. Then grandma came out with auntie. As she passed the cloaks auntie felt a clutch at her skirts which brought

her heart into her mouth. The events of the evening had not conduced to steady nerves. Next moment she caught sight of the imploring little faces. She put her finger on her lips, and glanced at grandma. The bees did not want any punishment. They sank back into obscurity. But it was all right now! She would come for them as soon as she could. Gorblessers!

Very soon came the expected step, and they rushed to meet her.

"Hush!" she whispered.

Bennie raised his eager arms, and was lifted up, and the others stuck closely by her. Queer how that staircase had shrunk again, they reflected. As for the egg thief—well, Bob, pattering along, with one hand on auntie's dress and the other on the banisters, cared nothing for him. He would n't dare to put a hand through and grab bare feet while she was there. No, indeed!

"Now, bees, what does this mean?"

Auntie sat on one of the beds, with the children hanging about her.

With breathless eagerness they poured out the story of the egg thief and their brave determination to inform her of his presence, and she listened and nodded approval. What else could she do under the circumstances? How much had they heard, she wondered, and how much did they understand? With the inconsequence of children they had forgotten all about Uncle Philip, and simply stuck to their story of the thief, their long wait in the dimly lit hall, their longings for her, and how lonely and frightened they had felt.

"But it's all right now, auntie," they murmured, clasping her neck. "And we were good to come and tell you, were n't we?"

"You were! And now, darlings, hop into bed again!"

It would be wiser to say nothing, she reflected. Questioning would only fix in their minds what she was anxious that they should forget—if they knew. Perhaps they had not listened to the conversation. But she felt misgivings. The bees usually did listen. But perhaps they had not understood—they were very young. Silence was golden.

"Will you do your hair here, auntie dear?" Bennie asked wistfully.

It would be so very nice if she would stay for a bit, so that they could feel quite safe.

With her customary intelligence she comprehended their feelings, and, slipping on her dressing-gown, began to take down the ruddy masses and brush them to and fro, with her mind wandering out into the night where a lonely, hunted man was hiding. She shivered in spite of the warmth, and was glad when one of her nephews started in pursuit of knowledge.

"Auntie," said Bob, "where does hair come from?"

"Out of the head, Bobbie."

"When you had all that in yours you must have felt rather stuffy and full up," observed the youth, thoughtfully.

This was a view of the question which had not before struck her. Feeling unable to cope with it, she said, "Lie down, dearie, and go to sleep."

Going to him she covered him up, and bent down

to kiss him. The thick clouds fell over his face, and the boy put up his arms round her.

"I like it, auntie. It's funny and tickly, but it's nice!"

"There's a warmf and colour about lauburn tresses what all other kinds lacks," observed Burton, thoughtfully from a neighbouring cot.

"Burt!" Auntie collapsed feebly on to the bed. "Who said that?" she inquired, when emotion allowed her to speak.

"A gentleman, auntie. The tall one with the brown face, you know."

"Mr.—Mr. Coverdale?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Yes, I believe so."

"When? About whom was he talking?"

"It was at the picksher gallery. He was talking to that other gentleman with long hair and a velvety jacket, like father wears. They were looking at the picksher of that naughty woman saying her prayers."

"Why was she naughty?" inquired auntie, in surprise, recalling the painting of a beautiful woman praying, with her hands clasped and eyes raised to heaven.

"'Cause she ought to have put her face in her hands, and not been staring about her in that manner."

"Oh!" Auntie marvelled at the criticism of the childish mind. "Was he speaking about the woman's hair?"

"Yes," interrupted Bennie, anxious to join the conversation. Auntie seemed quite interested, and he had been there, and knew as much as Burton. "Yes.

And we said it was just the colour of yours, only you had a lot more than that picksher thing."

"Bennie! You did n't! What did he say?"

"He did n't say nothing, auntie. He took a look at yours, and then at the lady's, and we whispered, 'Is n't it?' and he nodded. It was 'zactly alike."

"Go to sleep, laddies," murmured auntie.

She resumed her interrupted brushing, glancing almost shyly at the "lauburn tresses" which were "'zactly" like those which Brian Coverdale had admired.

Mrs. Rouse had light flaxen locks.

CHAPTER XIV

UNCLE PHILIP

"NO, Bees, not to-day. Grandma is poorly, and I can't leave her. She has a bad headache."

It was the next morning after breakfast, and the bees were suggesting that a walk would be agreeable. They looked disappointed at this decision, but no one thought of complaining. At home they were naughty children to be slapped and shaken, and to contrive to get their own way by hook or by crook. Here they were auntie's friends and companions who saw the difficulties of her position, and had to help her to the best of their power.

"I 'd give her a powder, and a cup of 'freshing hot tea, auntie," advised Bob.

"I will, doctor."

"Can we do anything to help, auntie?" asked Burton.

"Not at present, dear. Don't play near the house; grandma can't stand any noise."

"We 'll go down the field, and across to the island."

By this time the island no longer deserved its name, the water, all but a few pools, having dried up.

"Is grandma very bad?" asked Bob, noting how pale and grave auntie looked. He had forgotten about Uncle Philip, and only thought of the present anxiety. "Are you feeling very unhappy, precious?"

She smiled and brightened. The children's affection was very dear to her. They were such coaxing, loving little fellows.

"I am rather unhappy, Bobbie. But run off and play now. I'm very busy."

"If you want us will you whistle?" asked Bennie, eagerly. "Your own special whistle, auntie?"

When Minnie wished to summon either them or Poll, she had to use a penny whistle which was hung in the kitchen for the purpose. But auntie required no such aid. She had a way of putting two fingers in her mouth, and sending out a shrill, piercing note which filled her nephews with admiration, and which they had never heard equalled, save by a talented butcher boy at home. They had discovered this accomplishment by accident. On one occasion they had started for a walk, and forgotten Poll. There had been no time to return, but the bees had been so disappointed that auntie, recalling her old powers, had endeavoured from a good distance to attract the dog's attention. The children were overcome with amazement, and Poll pricked up his ears, and then bounded up to find what it might mean. Since then they had again and again urged her to perform, though, strangely enough, she was not proud of her ability, and, with the modesty of true genius, required some persuasion before she would oblige them.

She now smiled, but would not promise, and the bees ran away to the island, to a shed which they had discovered there, and of which they had taken possession. Poll bounded joyously in the rear, till something white caught his eye in the bushes, and he raced away in pursuit.

They ran into the wooden building, and stopped short, with exclamations of surprise, almost of dismay.

During all the time they had lived with Auntie Bell they had never seen any one on the island save themselves, and had come to regard it as their own property. And now here was a man lying stretched out at full length on the floor.

A second glance showed that it was Uncle Philip again. But such an Uncle Philip! Unbrushed, unwashed, and unshaven, he was not an uncle to reassure any one, and the way in which he sprang to his feet, and the savagery of his voice, were even more alarming.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing!" said Burton.

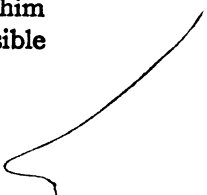
"Who is with you?"

"No one."

"For what have you come?"

"Nothing. We 're going back to Auntie Bell."

Uncle Philip scowled. He was thinking deeply. He had managed most successfully to elude pursuit so far. He had left the city unobserved, and no one knew of his presence in his home save his father, mother, and sister, and they, for their own sakes, would hold their tongues. And even they did not know where he was at present. And now these three little marplots had discovered him, and naturally would go open-mouthed to proclaim their discovery—if *they were not hindered!* Ah! that was the point! But how to hinder them? The bees' fear was not without grounds. A morally weak man when afraid is dangerous; and Uncle Philip was badly frightened. To him the bees were not helpless children, they were possible betrayers, to be silenced at any cost.



"Boys who come where they are not wanted often don't go back again," he snarled, without any clear idea of what he meant to do, save to frighten them. Had there been only one it might have fared badly with the child, but three were less manageable. One could have been detained until such time as he could make plans for further escape, but to detain three sturdy, strong-lunged children would be a matter of difficulty.

The boys looked at one another, and made a simultaneous dash for freedom. But Uncle Philip was too quick for them. He sprang between them and the door, his anger increased tenfold; for the bees' escape might have meant his capture.

"Let us go to Auntie Bell!" panted Burton. "We don't want to stay here any longer."

"You 'll never see Auntie Bell again!—never, so long as you live!" was Uncle Philip's answer, for he had determined that the only thing to be done was to so terrify them that they would be afraid to speak of him, afraid to do anything which he might forbid. No thought that he might be doing them an injury which would take them years to overcome—if ever they did—entered his mind; nor would he have cared had it done so. Himself and his own safety filled his thoughts to the exclusion of all else. "I shall keep you here till it is quite dark, and then——"

He did not finish, but the children's imagination filled up the blank.

"Auntie won't let you. She 'll come and look for us," said Burton, his chest heaving, but making a plucky attempt not to show fear.

For the next few minutes Uncle Philip piled up the

horrors that were in store for them, and the children's faces paled with a piteous terror that might have moved many men to compassion. But fear is cruel, and the captor was as terrified as the captives.

At length Bennie broke into a frightened wail. "I want auntie! Let us go to auntie! Let us go!"

The desired point seemed to have been reached.

"If I do, will you promise never to tell anybody that you have seen me? never to mention the words 'Uncle Philip'?"

In their relief the bees would have promised almost anything.

"We never will!" gasped Burton. "We'll never tell any one, 'cept Auntie Bell."

"You won't tell her! Do you hear me? *Not any one!*"

"No one but Auntie Bell," persisted Burton. They *must* be able to tell all to her, and to be comforted and petted.

In an access of rage Uncle Philip grasped at the nearest boy and shook him. "Not any one!" he reiterated. "Not any one! If you don't promise I'll keep you here till dark, and then—" Horrors again! Black holes—rushing waters—and frightened, helpless little ones, with auntie far away!

It was unfortunate for the success of his endeavour that it was Bob whom he held. Either Burton or Bennie would probably have given way and promised, and their word once given they would have kept it. But physical coercion did not suit Bob. In spite of the severity of the shake, which recalled nurse in her angriest moments, and in spite of his dread of what was to follow when it was dark, he set his square

young jaw in the obstinate pose which nurse knew and dreaded.

"'Cept Auntie Bell!" he gasped, when he could speak.

This was a hitch, just when matters seemed to be going all right, and the man clenched his fist as though meditating a blow. But at this moment rescue came from an unexpected quarter. As soon as Bob had been caught, Burton clenched his own small fists and prepared to lead the forlorn hope, but Bennie stopped him.

"Wait!" he panted. "We can't get him away! We're too little! I know!"

Running unchecked to the door of the shed, for Uncle Philip was too much absorbed in his prisoner to heed the other two, he called aloud, "Poll! Poll!"

That intelligent animal, disappointed in finding that the white something was not a rabbit, had strolled about on his own account till Bennie's shout attracted him. He bounded up, and the child grasped his collar and pulled him in. "At him, Poll! At him, lad!" he whispered, shaking with terror; and with every hair bristling on his body the dog crouched for his spring. In the very nick of time Uncle Philip saw him, dropped Bob, and dodged; the result being that Poll missed his aim. With a savage growl he turned and crouched again, but Bennie was on him.

"That 'll do, Poll! That 'll do!" he gasped.

Snarling with rage the animal yet obeyed the little master he loved; though had he chosen to do otherwise Bennie would have been helpless, for Poll was a big dog, and good feeding and healthy exercise had made him a powerful brute—a friend to be trusted,

but an enemy to dread. But with all his doggish soul he loved the little fellows who had rescued, fed, and petted him, and now the small hand at his neck restrained him as effectually as the strongest rope.

The tables were turned with a vengeance.

The bees and Poll held the whip-handle, and it was Uncle Philip's turn to sue for mercy.

Shaking with mingled fury and fear, he yet realised that he must beg where he had commanded; that he must make friends, and that instantly, or the children would be off at once to tell everything to everybody.

Bursting into a laugh, which did credit to his histrionic powers—he was a good amateur actor—he exclaimed: “I do believe the boys think I have been in earnest. Why, bees, it was nothing but a joke.”

They looked at him doubtfully. The humour had been rather too realistic for their taste, but a childish dread of ridicule made them pause. They took the precaution to move between Uncle Philip and the door, in order to have a free passage should the joke be resumed, and all three kept a hand on the snarling and bristling Poll.

“Did n't you mean it?” asked Burton, slowly.

“Mean it? Of course I did n't! You don't think I would hurt you really, do you?”

They had done so, and did not yet feel convinced to the contrary.

“You see,” he resumed confidentially, “I am playing hide-and-seek. You know how to play hide-and-seek, don't you? Some men are trying to find me, and I don't want them to do so.”

“I know!” assented Burton, recalling the scraps of

conversation they had heard the previous night, and, with a child's unexpected acuteness, picking out the very thing his seniors would have desired him to miss. "I know! You have 'mitted a forgery—that means stealed some money—and they want to take you to prison!"

This was putting matters plainly, and no mistake. Uncle Philip cast a glance at his nephew, which argued ill for the latter's well-being should he ever be in his power again.

"*I have not!*" he said, striving to keep down his fury, and considerably assisted thereto by the sight of Poll's bared fangs. Poll had never suffered from toothache in his life. "But they think I have, and that is why I am hiding. I should have thought that you would have been kind and helped me," he continued.

Had he used that tone in the beginning the chances are he would have got every promise he wished, even to the keeping his secret from Auntie Bell. But unfortunately Philip Burnham was not a man who trusted any one's word—perhaps he knew himself too well for that,—and the idea that small children would keep a promise, unless too terrified to break it, did not enter his mind. As it happened, the bees were fairly safe in the matter of secrets. In the old home they had always kept their own concerns private from nurse, and were well practised in maintaining a stolid front under her suspicious eye. And in the present happier circumstances they had so many little surprises for auntie that, had they looked a trifle more important than usual, she would simply have concluded that some great affair was being negotiated,

and that it would all be told in due time, without need of any intrusive questions.

"We won't tell anybody," said Burton, in answer to this appeal. "Will we, bees?"

"'Cept Auntie Bell!" said Bob, doggedly. He had suffered for this, and intended to stick to it.

Again Uncle Philip glared, and again controlled himself.

"Auntie Bell does n't want to know."

"Oh!" said the bees.

"You see, it is this way. She does n't want me to be caught, and if the men come down here and ask her where I am, if she does n't know she can't tell them."

This was sound logic.

"Oh!" said the bees again.

"If she knew she might have to tell a story——"

"Auntie Bell never tells stories!" burst out Bob, angrily.

"Of course not! But you see her reason for not wanting to know. Then she can't be tempted."

The point was put well. The trio looked at one another and considered. If she did n't want to know—that was a different matter. Who were they to lay temptation in the path of a weak woman? They wanted to tell her—they wanted it badly. They scarcely felt as though they could keep the dread secret to themselves; but if she did n't want to know! The loyal, loving little hearts tried to strengthen themselves that she might be spared.

"Are you sure? Quite, quite sure?" asked Bob.

"I give you my word," said Uncle Philip, eagerly.

The bees had heard that phrase before. With their

usual mimicry they automatically gave the right answer—the answer that grandpa had given the evening before.

"And what galan—galantee have I of your velocity?" gulped Bob. "Unfortunately—unfortunately—" Memory failed, and Burton took up the running:

"Unfortunately, Uncle Philip, your word is not worth that!"

All three made a gallant attempt to copy grandpa's snap of the finger and thumb. The attempt was not successful so far as noise went, but the effect was far more pronounced. Uncle Philip's handsome weak face was crimson. For once he saw himself as others saw him, when even these small creatures doubted his truth, and told him that he was not to be believed. Unaware of their peculiar talent in that direction, he did not know that the bees were giving a parrot-like repetition of words only—without the vaguest notion of their meaning; and the reproach brought a dull shame to him. No one knew better than himself how truly they spoke.

Meanwhile Bennie had been considering another point. Uncle Philip was an unpleasant person, an exceedingly unpleasant person! Left to himself he would have preferred to run away and never see him again, but if auntie wanted him to be kept safe, then it was his and his brothers' duty to do all they could to carry out the wishes of the well-beloved, even if she was never to know that they had done so.

"This is n't a good hidey-place," he said gravely.

"It is not, particularly," assented Mr. Burnham, bitterly. "But I don't know of a better one."

"I do," said Bennie. "I know a much better one."

His brothers listened with inward surprise, but no sign showed on their faces. What was Bennie up to now? How did he know of a place that they did n't? But it did n't matter. Trust Ben to know what he was about!

Uncle Philip hesitated. As he knew, his present refuge was anything but safe should it once be discovered that he had been home; but was it likely that so young a child would really know of any other more secure? Drowning men will clutch at straws, so he asked, "Where is it?"

"Not far. It's on the island."

"Is it a good one?"

"First-class! Is n't it, bees?"

Pinning their faith to their brother, Burton and Bob made prompt answer that it was, indeed! Of course it was, if Bennie said so!

"Well, show me then! But mind! If you are playing any trick——"

"Come with us, Poll! Don't go away, there's a good dog!" whispered Bennie, and the three walked out, keeping a fair distance between themselves and their uncle, whom they still regarded with fear. They need not have exhorted Poll to stand by them. He stalked along, casting glances every now and then at the man who followed, and relieving his feelings by many internal rumblings.

As they went on their way, knowledge of their destination suddenly flashed upon Bob and Burton. What a chap Bennie was! What a clever chap! He had his head screwed on the right way, and no mistake!

They came to the kennel. "There!" said the child.

Uncle Philip looked at it with a flush of anger. Was the child daring to make fun of him? He knelt down and peered in, and then said in amazement, "Why! if it is n't the old water-butt!"

It was indeed a hiding-place! Uncle Philip examined it carefully. So completely was it hidden with shrubs, bushes, and long grasses that no one would be likely to see it. The fugitive was not a big man, and under his present circumstances could have hidden in a much smaller place.

"Who knows of this?"

"No one but Auntie Bell."

"What about the dog?"

"He won't hurt you if we tell him not."

They explained to Poll that Uncle Philip was not to be assaulted, and that he was going to share the kennel for a bit. Poll grunted, and lay down. He did not like it. He did not approve. But if his young masters wished it he supposed it would have to be done. At all events, his business was to obey.

Uncle Philip lay down on the grass. He was tired—almost exhausted—and hungry.

"Could you get me anything to eat?" he asked suddenly. If these small children wished, they might be able to help him in the matter of supplies very materially. But they must understand that his presence was not to be mentioned. At present he was feeling half starved, having had nothing to eat since the previous mid-day. With the callousness of a thoroughly selfish man, he had no qualms in making use of the little ones he had endeavoured to frighten,

and whom he still intended to terrify into silence, when once his hunger was satisfied, and he had managed to get rid of the dog.

"We 'll ask Minnie," said Burton.

"You 'll do nothing of the kind! Get something out of the larder without being seen."

The bees grew hot all over as the enormity of the suggestion gradually entered their minds.

"We're not going to forge bread," said Burton, flushing.

"I 'll tell you what!" suggested Bob. "Minnie won't ask who it 's for. We 'll just ask her for something to eat."

"Very well. You go; and the other two stay here."

But the other two declined. United they felt strong—divided, who could tell what would happen! In vain Uncle Philip stormed. The bees had the upper hand, and intended to keep it. At last, realising this, and that without their aid he could get nothing, he let them go, and during their absence turned his attention to Poll. Somehow or other the animal must be rendered helpless. He considered ways and means. Would it be possible to kill him? But the dog was large and powerful, and had lived his young days in an atmosphere that had rendered him suspicious and wary. He did not like this man who had assaulted his young master. He had been forbidden to touch him, so touch him he would not; but he kept an eye on him, and turned a deaf ear to his blandishments, showing his teeth so savagely when Uncle Philip tried to approach that the latter was obliged to leave matters alone for the present.

The bees found no difficulty in getting supplies.

"Darlings!" said auntie. How sweet and gentle she looked! What an atmosphere of home and rest she created to the depressed adventurers! How the troubles of the outer world fell from their burdened shoulders when the woman they loved greeted them. "Darlings, grandma is still very poorly. I have put your dinners into this basket. You can take it to the island, and eat them there. Minnie has made three of your favourite little puddings."

Yes! the bees had their supplies; but at what a cost!

They were not greedy children, but they had all the usual childish love of sweets, and to give up the little puddings would be hard. Also they were healthily hungry, and the idea of having no dinner was dreadful; and, of course, it was quite impossible to ask for anything more in the face of that heavy basket of good things.

"If it were n't for Auntie Bell I don't think we could do it!" said Burton, in choked tones. "I want something to eat so very much."

"If it—if it just had n't happened to be those puddings!" said Bennie.

"It's auntie—our own auntie, who wants him to get away! We *must* do it!" sighed Bob.

Still slower grew their steps.

"P'r'aps he won't want it quite all. It feels a good weight," said Burton, hopefully.

"Well, have you got anything?" demanded Uncle Philip. He looked fiercely at them. "You have told!"

The packed basket was not a snatched piece of whatever they could find.

"No, we have n't!" said Burton, slowly. "It 's our dinners."

Without another word Mr. Burnham sat down and tore open the packages. The bees' hopes faded gradually as they watched the onslaught. But even a man who has not had food for four-and-twenty hours cannot manage the united dinners of three small boys, when they are provided by a liberal-minded auntie.

At last he stopped satisfied. The children brightened as they looked at the remnants. Actually two of the little puddings had been left. But they were doomed to disappointment. Wrapping up what was over, Uncle Philip threw it into the kennel, remarking, "That will do for later on."

No thought that the children's generosity had left them dinnerless crossed his mind. At the best of times Philip Burnham was little given to thinking of others, and now he was filled with his own anxieties to the exclusion of all else.

The bees gulped down their feelings as best they could—too proud to ask for what was not given. But they buckled their belts tighter, and thought of tea-time.

It is pleasant to have to relate that Uncle Philip did not profit by his selfish thoughtlessness, for Poll, finding a nice collection of food in his own home, naturally concluded that it was meant for himself, and made a hearty meal off everything that was left—including the little puddings. He had a catholic taste!

"Now about that promise!" said Uncle Philip, grimly. He was refreshed and strengthened, and determined that this time the bees should not escape.

Physical coercion was out of the question with Poll looking on. But there were other ways. "You will not tell any one——"

"'Cept Auntie Bell!" interrupted Bob, with a child's persistence.

"You will not tell *any one*! If you do, when night comes I shall come crawling—crawling up the field, and into the house, and up to your room, and shall creep and creep close to your beds, and put my hands—they will be quite cold—on to your faces! And when auntie comes to call you in the morning, there won't be any bees to call—never, never again!"

The words were whispered slowly and draggily, and the blanks were effective. Imaginative Bennie shuddered, and even his more stolid brothers felt their blood curdle at the thought of this sinuous approach. It almost broke down Bob's hardihood.

"I don't mean I *will* tell her!" he faltered. "I think I won't! But I won't promise!"

"Very well! Now you know what will happen if you do! When it is bed-time, and the light is put out, think of what I say! Think of that cold, cold hand!"

There was little chance of their not doing so. They gazed fascinated, with the fear of the night already upon them.

"Now you can go! But remember! And bring me something more to eat to-morrow. Go!"

There was no need to speak again.

Secure in the hiding-place they had found for him, refreshed by the meal they had given up, satisfied that his wants would be attended to the next day, Uncle Philip felt fairly easy. Something in the terror

and depression of the little fellows as they moved slowly away, followed by Poll, struck even his selfish heart. "I'm not going to hurt them!" he muttered. "I'm not really going to touch them! I have n't done them any harm!" And he slept with an easy conscience.

No harm! And he had put the dread of night into their hearts, and had laid the burden of secrecy on their childish shoulders. No harm! And they were shaking with a misery and fear they could hardly control!

Once out of sight they raced away till the bed of the stream lay between them and their enemy, and they could at least see the house which contained comfort, even though that comfort was unattainable.

"Auntie won't let him in! She will never let him!" panted Burton, struggling to be courageous.

"I don't want him to come creepy-crawly, and put cold, cold hands on our faces!" gasped Bennie.

The picture was too much for them. They buried their faces in Poll's thick coat and sobbed.

"I want auntie!" wailed Bennie. "I want to sit on her lap, and be cuddled! I want her to say: 'Never mind, darling! my own little bee! no one shall hurt you!'"

It was too alluring. Scrambling to their feet they hurried homewards. Auntie Bell was resting after a hard morning's work when the three tumbled on to her in a storm of tears and entreaties.

"You won't let him, auntie! You won't let him! We shan't be taken away, shall we?"

They were not crying children, as a rule, and she

could not make it out. All three in tribulation at the same moment; panting incoherences about not being taken away—not being creepy-crawled—no cold, cold hands—and half-a-dozen other fragments! She could make nothing of it, and could only kiss them, and beg them to speak plainly.

The chances are that had she not been called away she would have heard the whole story, but before the children had recovered sufficiently to tell an intelligible tale grandpa shouted for her. But they felt worlds better!

When she returned it was to find that they were in the kitchen with Minnie. Tears had gone, and they were in a state of excitement.

"Please 'm," said Minnie, "could you spare me for a couple of hours this evening? I could give Master Bees an early tea, and lay the other one before going out."

"Oh, auntie! an early tea! an early tea!" shouted the children, excitedly.

She could not understand it, but gave consent at once.

"Cut more bread and butter!" implored Burton, looking at the piled-up plate. "I could eat all that myself!"

The performances at the table struck auntie almost dumb with amazement. "Don't you think you've had enough?" she protested, at length.

"Oh no, auntie! Just a bit more!"

"If you are really hungry you can have dry bread."

She thought this would settle the matter. But they clutched at the slices offered, and devoured them with every appearance of starvation.

"One would think they had n't had any dinner," said astonished auntie.

The bees breathed hard, said nothing, and helped themselves anew.

CHAPTER XV

PASTRY-MAKING

WHAT was that? Auntie sat up in bed. Was it a noise from the bees' room, or only her own imagination? After listening for a few minutes she was about to lie down again, when the sound was repeated—a low, muffled sobbing. She sprang up and hurried to the rescue.

The bees were obeying to the letter Uncle Philip's injunction. They were thinking of deep holes, black rushing waters, crawling figures, and cold, cold hands. And their nerves had broken down during the process. Three trembling figures huddled together on one bed for protection. At the sight of the white vision a simultaneous shriek broke forth, which made auntie shut the door in haste, and be thankful that grandma's room was at the other side of the house.

"Oh, don't, don't! We have n't told! Please don't! Cold, cold hands!" sobbed the frightened children.

"Why, bees! what is it?"

There was another cry—of relief this time,—and again she was striving to make sense out of the fragments, but with small success.

"Holes" and "being taken away," and, above all,

the "cold, cold hands" that had terrified their imagination.

This last put her off the track. Some one must have been frightening them with foolish tales, she decided, with sudden anger. Could it have been Minnie? No, surely she was to be trusted! But who else had been with them? If she could discover the wretch who had changed her bright, merry bees into these clinging tremblers she would express her opinion in no measured terms.

In the meantime the first thing to be done was to reassure them. "No one shall take you away, darlings! No one! I had a letter from mother, and she said they were n't thinking of coming home yet. And I should n't dream of letting anybody else have you."

"Are you sure, auntie? quite, quite sure! You won't let him come in the dark?"

"Let whom come, Burt?"

But the child only nestled closer, with his red head on her shoulder. In the daylight they might have plucked up courage to tell her, but in the night, with the remembrance of the threats, it was out of the question.

"No one shall come in the dark. You are my own little bees, and I should soon send any one away who tried to steal you."

The children brightened. Their trust in her was great. Perhaps, after all, they had been unnecessarily frightened.

"You won't let cold, cold hands come on our faces?" pleaded Bennie.

Again auntie felt a spasm of anger as she imagined some foolish ghost tale.

"Who has been saying anything about cold hands?" she asked.

But they only clung tighter. She was obliged to leave the question and proceed to argument.

"Of course no one shall put cold hands on your faces, if you don't like. Dear me! I wish some one would put a cold hand on me, but there is n't a chance such a hot night as this. How could any one get cold hands? It would be very refreshing, don't you think?"

The little fellows began to smile rather tremulously, and to think that they had been silly. They had n't realised the impossibility of making hands cold in sultry weather. Had Uncle Philip been telling stories on purpose to frighten them? It was very shocking if he had, but certainly a relief.

"Don't you think you would like to get back into bed, and I will tuck you up?"

But in spite of their increasing confidence the thought of being left alone in the dark brought such a clutch round her that she saw that it would not do.

"If I let you come into my bed will you promise not to take up too much room, and not to kick or snore?" she asked gaily.

The bees began to giggle, and eagerly promised to compress their small persons into the smallest possible space.

"Very well! Come along, then! But not a bit of noise!"

"He won't dare to come into auntie's room; and if he comes to ours he won't know where to find us," whispered Burton, as he and Bennie pattered along

the passage. Bob was the lucky one to be carried this time.

Five minutes later they were fast asleep, though their starts and mutterings told that fear still followed them. Auntie lay awake, puzzling as to who could be the culprit, and feeling that no punishment could be too severe, should she ever discover him or her.

The next two or three days brought no solving of the problem. No explanation could be obtained from the children, who evidently shrank from the subject. Minnie protested indignantly that she would n't frighten the darlings for worlds. "Tell them ghost tales, mum? Not me! Was n't I scared out of my wits myself when a little 'un! If I can find the person who 's done it I 'll half murder him!"

Auntie did not rebuke the maiden for her language. She felt that she would be pleased to perform the second half when Minnie had finished the first.

They clung about her with even more than their usual affection, and seldom went far from her side, save once a day when they scampered off to the island, presumably to eat their lunch there. They were usually back again in a very few minutes. She would have wondered if they were not sickening for some illness, were it not for their prodigious appetites. Nothing seemed to come amiss. On one occasion Minnie, unaware that they had already had thick slices of bread and butter for lunch, offered them a second instalment. Though auntie had seen them running off to the island with their first lunch only ten minutes ago, they accepted this windfall gleefully, and ate it up on the spot. She was reduced to looking through *Ailments and Diseases of Children*, in order

to find if an abnormal hunger were a symptom of anything.

Not wishing them to be exposed to further night fears, she had a large mattress thrown down in her own room, and made up into a bed; and the grateful bees, chuckling to themselves at the thought of Uncle Philip's discomfiture should he venture on that creepy-crawly approach, assured her of their increasing and undying affection, and recovered much of their usual spirits.

"I intend to make pastry this morning, dears. Would you prefer to watch me, or to go and play?"

Could there be a moment's hesitation? Even without the incessant fear of Uncle Philip's appearance, which took away a great deal of the pleasure of playing in the field, the idea of seeing how pastry was made was alluring. Until the present it had always grown on the table, so far as the bees knew. They had no idea that any one below a pastry-cook in station could make it; and now here was Auntie Bell speaking in quiet and modest tones, as of an everyday occurrence which it did not even occur to her to be proud of doing.

"Very well! Then we will put on our overalls and roll up our sleeves."

And the three small bees, and auntie, looking very much like a large one, wended their way to the kitchen.

There they placed on the table a pastry-board, rolling-pin, scales, dishes, tins, and many other interesting articles, not to mention various ingredients.

Auntie stood at one end, and the three dragged up chairs and knelt round. Scales are always entertaining. Bob was permitted to manipulate the weights

for measuring out the flour, Bennie for the lard, and Burton for the butter.

"What are you going to make, auntie?"

"Some pies, and big tarts, and tartlets."

She put a lemon on the floor and placed her foot on it, pressing it to and fro.

"What's that for, auntie?" inquired her ever-inquisitive nephews.

"To soften it, so as to have more juice."

"I'll try," said Bennie. It would be clever to be able to balance on a lemon. But, alas! as soon as the small boy put his weight on it, it slipped, and flung him down. He was up again instantly, breathing rather quickly, and rubbing away a few tears.

"Dear old fellow!" said auntie, with her bare arm round his neck—her hands were too floury to touch him—"that was a bang!"

"I'm not crying, auntie. It's only the tears coming. But I'm 'suading them not!" gasped the child.

"Why do tears come, auntie, when one does n't want them to?" inquired Bob. "Very often one would n't cry about things if it were n't for those silly nuisance tears."

"I believe," said auntie, mixing a little of the lemon-juice with some water, and pouring it on to the flour, "I believe tears are kept in a bag near the eyes, and a knock loosens the string, and out they pop. At least that is what my teacher used to tell me when I was a little girl. Bob, will you grease those tins for me? Here is the hot lard, and here is a brush. Be sure you do it thoroughly, or the tarts will stick."

Bob was thorough. If the pastry stuck it would not be his fault.

"Auntie, do you mean to say that sticky stuff will ever turn into pies?" inquired Burton.

"I hope so," she replied, rolling it out.

"Why do you put it in the oven?"

"To dry the wet out of it. It would stick to your teeth like this."

"But if you want the water dried out, why do you put it in? Would n't it save time not to?"

Auntie drew a long breath, and, not for the first time, lamented that she had not studied things more particularly before the arrival of her nephews. She cut off three lumps and handed one to each boy. "How would you like to make a tart yourselves?"

The bees flushed with pleasure. There was never any telling what delightful thing would happen when in this society. They were actually, ordinary everyday boys like themselves, about to make pastry!

"We ought to roller it, ought n't we?" inquired Burton, watching proceedings.

"I 'll do it for you soon."

"I know!" said Bennie, the inventive.

Hurrying away, he returned with three rulers culled from their playroom. "Now we can do it!"

"Splendid idea, Ben!" commented auntie.

She smiled to herself, noting how close had been the watch they had kept upon her. They spread flour on the table, placed their paste on it, dipped their hands in the flour again, and ran them up and down their rulers before beginning.

"Why does it stick, auntie?" demanded Bennie, scraping it off the table with his nails.

"Not enough flour, dear."

"Mine does n't!" said Bob, lifting his piece up.

"Oh, bother! It's fallen! Never mind—'t is n't very dirty! I'll ruler it again."

"Dear me! Is that some one at the front door? What shall I do? Minnie is at the top of the house, and will never hear. Burt, are your hands sticky?"

"No, auntie. I've been rubbing them in flour. They've got bits of stuff on them, specially round the nails, but they don't stick."

"Then wipe them with this cloth, dear; slip off your overall and run to the door. It can't be any one important at this time in the morning."

He was soon back.

"Well, Burt?"

"It was the gentleman who stopped me fighting, auntie—the one who wants you to be his nurse till Dr. Bob grows old enough to make him well."

"Gracious!" murmured Miss Burnham, feeling the blood rush to her cheeks in uncomfortable fashion.

"Whom did he want?"

"Grandma. But I said she was out, and would n't he rather have you, 'cause you were much nicer; and he said he would."

"Gracious!" murmured Miss Burnham again. "Where did you put him, Burt? I can't be bothered to see him."

"Please take this chair, and allow me to delieve you of your hat and berella," said Burton, with a charming politeness, that for once failed to arouse any pride in his relative's breast.

Bob and Bennie slipped down, murmuring courteously, "'Scuse us for not shaking hands; we really are n't fit to touch you."

With such good examples before her it was a pity

that auntie did not do better. It must be confessed that on this occasion the nephews' manners were far in advance of the aunt's.

She faced round, gasping, "*Gracious!*" for the third time, and with a vague wonder as to whether her bees were an unmixed blessing.

Mr. Coverdale was standing at the door, looking rather hot and embarrassed.

"I am afraid I am intruding. I'm sorry!"

Miss Burnham's manners did not improve. Instead of trying to set him at his ease she said, "Well, I think it would be an empty compliment to say that you are not."

Mr. Coverdale recovered his self-possession, and sat down on the wooden rocking-chair Burton had dragged forward.

"You can't have the heart to send a poor delicate chap back without a rest. It is a long walk here. But don't let me interrupt work. I can sit and chat."

"I believe you wished to see my mother."

"Well, of course I was obliged to ask for her."

In her confusion Miss Burnham rolled out her paste till it was nearly the size of the board, and far too thin for practical purposes. She folded it together again.

"I am sorry she is out."

"It does not matter. I merely called to bring a book which she said she could not obtain."

"That is very good of you."

"Not at all! It served for an excuse."

Cookery books advise a cool and light hand for pastry. Miss Burnham began to have fears that the present batch would be a failure.

Burton came to her rescue. He had managed to resume his overall, and was now struggling with the sleeves. "Will you roll them up, please?" he begged of the visitor. "You are the only one who has clean hands."

"All right! It's the proper thing to have bare arms when one is cooking, is it, my man?"

Bennie looked up, and noticed Mr. Coverdale's eyes were resting on auntie's.

"Auntie's arms are lovely and soft, like velvet, when you put your cheek against them," he remarked. "Try, and see."

Miss Burnham's start ruined the cover she was placing on a pie. In despair she put it on the board again. She could not snub or be cold to the loving little fellow, but had no such compunction towards the big one.

"Mr. Coverdale, the kitchen is no place for you. Will you kindly go into the other room?"

"No, I won't! I don't see why you should be cross with *me*, and send *me* away, because the little bee chooses to make an embarrassing remark. *I'm* not naughty! *I've* done nothing! *I've* not even tried to follow his advice!"

His eyes still rested on her arms, and he abstractedly smoothed his cheek with his fingers.

When a lady says, "Will you?" and a gentleman says, "I won't!" what can she do? Nothing! Auntie Bell did it.

Bob came to her assistance this time. "Auntie," he said, in distressed tones, "my worm won't come right. It either squashes flat, or wriggles about and crawls off the table."

"Your what, Bobbie?"—so much amazed that she forgot her embarrassment.

"My worm, auntie. I want a worm on my tart like yours." He pointed to the slender rolls of pastry which were laid across the jam. "Look at it! It's down again!" He picked up the disreputably black piece in despair, and dusted it on the sleeve of his overall.

Worms! Worms crawling about her pastry! Auntie felt that she would never fancy that particular kind of tart again, but she put her fingers on the strip, and ran it out to the desired shape.

"Oh, thank you!" beamed the boy. "Auntie's so clever—" he began to their visitor, but was cut short. Auntie had had her performances praised in public before.

"When did you fight, Burton?" she inquired, feeling that this must be a safe subject.

"Better not ask," suggested Mr. Coverdale.

His advice was ignored.

"It was the day of the musical At Home, auntie."

"Oh! Whom were you fighting?"

"Egerton."

"Why?"

"'Cause he said you were a old maid."

"Egerton's got no sense!" commented Bennie.

"He does n't even know what a old maid is," added Bob.

"Do you?" asked auntie, feebly, too disconcerted to know how to change the subject.

"'Course! You told us. A old maid is a lady who is so unfortunate as not to have any little boys of her own to love her—and no big boy, either, for

the matter of that!—so some foolish and iggerant people think that she will be unkind to other people's little boys if she has the chance. That is all!"

The mimicry was perfect. The caught breath and lowering of the voice at the parenthetical remark, the sadness, reproach, and slight bitterness, were produced to the life.

"But now," chimed in Burton, "we are your own little boys, and we love you ever so much—don't we, bees?—so you can't be one any longer!"

"Yes, indeedums!" responded his brothers; this being strongest asseveration.

Auntie was scarlet. Mr. Coverdale was out of his chair, with his hand on the bare arm, whose velvety softness Bennie had so highly commended. "But there is another item," he said breathlessly. "What of the big boy, Bell? What of him?"

"Bennie!" gasped auntie. "That is grandma's knock at the front door! Bob, take Mr. Coverdale to the sitting-room!"

"Auntie," said Burton, as he found himself alone with his relative, "look what a different colour my tart is from yours. Is n't it queer?"

Considering the vicissitudes through which the said tart had passed, perhaps it would have been queerer had it retained its pristine whiteness. But Burton regarded the grubby mess with pride.

"Did you tell grandma that Mr. Coverdale was here, Bennie?" auntie asked, on the return of her nephews.

"Yes, auntie. And now she's talking nineteen to the dozen," responded that youth.

He received no rebuke for his remark.

"I think he was sorry to have to go away," observed Bob. "It is disappointing to have to go and listen to a grandma in a sitting-room, when one wants to talk to a auntie in the kitchen."

"Do you think so, darling?" murmured auntie, her eyes wandering furtively to the arm Brian Coverdale had clasped.

"How will we know our tarts from yours, and from each other's?" asked Burton, anxiously. "We don't want them mixed."

Auntie felt that there would be no fear of them being mistaken for hers, though there might be for each other's, as in point of dirt and disreputability there was not a pin to choose between the three.

"We will put them in different places, bees, and then you will all know your own."

She opened the oven door, and filled the shelves. Three red heads were poked under her arms, three eager hands held out the tarts, and three small boys smiled with satisfaction as she placed them in different positions, and bade each one remember his own.

"We would n't like them mixed," repeated Burton. "I 'm not going to taste a single mouthful of mine. I know whom I 'm going to give it all to—every little bit!"

"So are we!" chimed in his brothers, dancing about gleefully, and then assisting to clear up.

"Oh, bees!" murmured auntie, with mingled gratitude and nausea.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PICNIC

"B EES, what do you think of a picnic this afternoon? It is such a glorious day that it seems a shame not to take advantage of it, and we cannot expect much more warm weather."

"Where would we go?"

"My idea is to walk up the road, across the fields, and go into the wood. We could take a spirit-lamp and have tea there."

Satisfied that it was not to be the island—there was no pleasure to be had there now—the three received the prospect with joy.

"We could take our tarts there. Things always taste better out-of-doors. Why do they, auntie? Will they be done in time?"

"Plenty of time," assented auntie, with a fervent hope that they would, indeed, taste better out-of-doors. "I will pack the tea-basket, and we will start after dinner. The evenings are growing so short now we must not be late."

Appetites at dinner were small. Who cared for such common, everyday things as meals when a picnic was in view? As soon as it was over, the bees were sent out to play till auntie was ready.

They quickly presented themselves before her again.

"Auntie, Miss Smith and Egerton are coming up the road."

"And I am not dressed!" ejaculated auntie, flying about. "Go and meet them, bees, and give Miss Smith a seat in the garden. Tell her I won't be longer than I can help, and ask her to excuse me for a few minutes."

"Shan't we be able to go on the picnic? Will we have to stay at home?"

"Of course not! It will not make any difference. Run!"

Miss Smith smiled as the little fellows ran to meet her, removing their hats from their ruddy heads. In common with most women she found their pretty manners delightful, perhaps all the more so from their contrast to Egerton's.

He greeted their performance with contempt. "Why do you take off your hats to Miss Smith?"

"'Cause she's a lady. Gentlemen always take off hats to ladies."

"She is n't a lady! She's only my governess."

Egerton also was quick at picking up the ways of those about him.

The bees burst out laughing. Egerton was too ridiculous, and his ignorance was appalling! Fancy not knowing a lady when he saw her!

"She's got a long dress. Any one who has a long dress is a lady. I thought every one knew that!" said Burton.

"You are one, are n't you, Miss Smith?" asked Bennie.

"I used to be considered so before I came to live with Mrs. Rouse, Bee," said Miss Smith, rather bitterly.

"Governesses are only servants," said Egerton. "You would n't take off your hats to a servant!"

"We should!" said the bees, indignant at their manners being thus aspersed. On one occasion when they had met Minnie out for a walk with her mother they had made her blaze with pride at their threefold salutation.

"Auntie Bell says a boy who is n't polite to ladies is n't a gentleman," observed Bennie.

"Does she? Does she say that?"

The opinions of a lady who could swim, and do all the other deeds of prowess over which the bees were never tired of dilating, were worth something. And when Miss Burnham came out, for the first time in his life he removed his hat unbidden, looking mingled sheepish and defiant. But the three took the action as a matter of course, Miss Smith had the sense to conceal her surprise, and auntie, understanding the effort that had been made, smiled and included him in her greeting.

"Good afternoon, Miss Smith. Good afternoon, Egerton."

As it was her usual plan to ignore his presence he felt the difference. After all, why should n't he? He was as big as the bees, and as old! It was a nuisance to be hustled into that kind of thing, but to do it of a fellow's own accord! That was different. It certainly did make a chap feel more grown up, and altogether more important.

"Mrs. Rouse would be pleased if you could let the bees spend the afternoon with Egerton," said Miss Smith.

"That is kind of her. But we are just starting for

a picnic. Suppose you come with us instead. We should be glad."

Miss Smith flushed with pleasure. It was not Mrs. Rouse's custom to be courteous to those whom she did not consider her equals, and Miss Burnham spoke as to a friend.

"Thank you very much! I am afraid I must not stay. But Egerton will like it, as you are so kind as to invite him; won't you, Egerton?"

"Yes, please," responded the boy, with unusual politeness.

"Are you sure you cannot? Well, you must have a little fruit before starting for home again. Bennie, will you bring that dish of plums? That's right, dear. Pass them round."

"How many have you taken?" whispered Egerton, as he picked the largest.

Bennie stared for a moment, and then grew crimson. "I'm not a wicked thief!"

Egerton stared too. What queer chaps the bees were! Jolly to play with, and all that; but such very odd notions they had! He had not at all intended to be offensive, and here was Bennie glaring as though he would like to fight. Stealing too! What a word! Of course stealing was wicked; but to prig things was quite different. Mother always laughed when she said, "How many have you taken this time?" It was a joke. She never sent him for things that really mattered. What was the good of being trusted if you were n't to get any advantage from it? The boy ate his plum in silence, and puzzled over many things.

Miss Smith soon rose to go. "I will call for Egerton this evening," she said. "Good-bye!"

The bees opened the gate for her, and removing their hats waved them in reply. Example is better than precept. Egerton joined them. How perplexing things were! Mother said Miss Smith was n't a lady, and would laugh at him for being polite to her. The bees said she was, and laughed at him for not knowing a thing like that. What was a chap to do between them? Perhaps it would be better to be on the bees' side. He could roar and kick if mother displeased him, and then she would stop; but if he started that game with the bees they ran away, and refused to play.

"I will not be five minutes," said auntie. "Call Poll."

No picnic would be complete without that friend. The whistle summoned him, and he came bounding up to see what the fun was now.

He and Egerton were very good friends. Had he been a small dog the boy would probably have teased; but Poll's size commanded, and received, respect. So he sat down, and offered his paw. After which the five engaged in a rough and tumble until auntie and the tea-basket appeared.

As they turned up a lane close by, a man was seen leaning against a gate, at the sight of whom auntie flushed with mingled relief and shame, though all pleasure fled for the time being. His presence proved that Philip was still at large; but oh! the disgrace and humiliation of being spied upon, and having her movements watched lest she should be in communication with her brother!

The bees did not like his appearance.

"He's looking after us, auntie!" complained

Burton. "Now he's coming along. Tell him to go away!"

"No, dear, I can't do that. Don't look back! Take no notice!"

"I've seen him before," observed Bob.

"Has he ever spoken to you?"

"No, not to us. But he did to Minnie once. He put his arm round her, and tried to kiss her."

Auntie flushed again—with anger this time.

"What did she say?"

"I'll give you a clout over the head if you dare to lay your filthy paws on me again, my fine man!"

"Gracious, Bob!"

"Yes, auntie. But 'it's as well to speak your mind to that kind of gentry at once, or there's no knowing what liberties they'll be taking with a 'spectable girl who's got a good cracter, and intends to keep it!'"

Bob tossed his head in virtuous indignation.

Minnie's sentiments were commendable, though her protest might have been couched in more refined language.

The party climbed a stile, and crossed into a field.

"Will you race, auntie?"

"I think not just yet. I am afraid the tea would be spoiled."

Auntie walked along the path, and the children scampered about in all directions, continually urging her to "Come here!" or "Look at this!" or "Hurry, auntie! I want you!" and asking a thousand questions.

And she endeavoured, as much as possible, to be in four places at the same minute, and answer more or less—mainly less—efficiently. Until the arrival of

her nephews Miss Burnham had been under the impression that she was a fairly well-informed woman. She now knew that her ignorance was colossal.

"Auntie, what's the good of roots?" inquired Burton, after falling over one in his headlong career.

"Lots of good, Burt. They balance the tree for one thing. The wind would blow it over if it had n't any."

"Oh! What else?"

"They go down into the earth and find the water when there is n't any on the top."

"How does the water get there?"

"When it rains it runs through."

"When they have found it what do they do with it?"

"Drink it up. The roots are full of mouths. No, you can't see them; they are not like our mouths. Trees want water as much as we do."

She felt she was getting on swimmingly.

"But I thought you said there was fire in the middle of the earth?"

"I believe there is. At least many clever people say there is."

Rocks ahead!

"Then why does n't the water put the fire out?"

Among the breakers at last!

"I believe it does n't get down so far as the fire, Burt."

"I'll tell you what it is, auntie!" remarked the boy, after a pause given to profound meditation. "I've often wondered how it was the trees did n't die during the cold winter. I expect the reason is 'cause of these roots. They put their toes against the fire, and are as warm and comferable as possible."

Auntie drew a long breath and waited for the next onslaught.

Egerton turned over a big stone which lay on the path, and revealed the colony of small creatures which ever congregate beneath. Of course questions flowed still more busily, and auntie felt that life was hardly worth living. "Look at that hateful thing with heaps, of legs!" he shouted. "Why does it have all those, auntie?"

She smiled to herself at the adoption. "Because it does, dear. I don't know any other reason."

The answer was woefully inadequate, but it was accepted, and investigations pursued in a new line.

"Does it move them all in turns, or put some by ready for 'mergencies when others get hurt?"

She was fain to admit ignorance.

"I think it must put them by. I don't see how it could remember which to attend to next if they were all in use at the same time. It has n't much of a head, has it?"

"It certainly has run more to leg than brain, Egerton."

"Auntie, there 's a thing I 've been wanting to know for ages."

Miss Burnham braced herself anew. "What is it, Bob?"

"Are worms blind? This is n't the real thing I want; it comes on later!"

"I believe some are."

"So do I, 'cause when they 've been lying with their head out of their front door they don't take any notice when I put a stick close to them, though they bounce in and shut the door in a hurry when I touch

them. They walk about under the earth, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Do the father and mother worms have little boy and girl worms?"

Bob seemed to have worms on the brain, Miss Burnham reflected, recalling his remarks of the morning. She wished she had taken more interest in the domestic habits of these creatures, but felt she was fairly safe in admitting that they had.

"I'm glad I'm not a little boy worm," put in Burton. "I *could n't* love a father worm—so that's all there is about it!"

"Nor a mother worm, either," observed Bob.

"But we could a Auntie Bell worm!" said Bennie, ardently.

Auntie shuddered, and felt that her identity as a woman was lost. The progress of the party was delayed till protestations of mutual affection had been exchanged. In a glow of renewed good fellowship the walk was resumed.

"I wish I had a Auntie Bell worm!" sighed Eger-ton, enviously.

Bob resumed his inquiries.

"What I want to know is this. When the mother worm takes walks with her childerns, and goes out of the back door, suppose she lets go of one of their hands for a minute, how does she ever find it again? Back door, mind, auntie! 'Course at the front door they would come out on to the top, and could feel about, but at the back it's down into the dark, with earth all about them. What does she do?"

Auntie gasped, and feeling herself unable to cope seriously with the question, relapsed into frivolity.

"Perhaps she whistles, Bobbie."

The boy looked at her with unqualified admiration. "And to think I never thought of that! Auntie, how clever you are! It's wonderful how simple things are when they are splained, are n't they? How do you know so much?"

She blushed deeply at this unmerited praise, but scarcely saw how to repudiate it. Fortunately Poll was seen investigating a hole, and all four tore off to assist him, while the walking "Inquire Within upon Everything" sighed relief at the momentary respite.

On their return they entered the wood, and the inquiries that began anew were more easily answered.

"Are we to have tea at once, auntie, or wait a bit?"

"Where shall we have it?"

"Could n't we have a game first?"

"Shall we lay the cloth?"

"I think the best thing to do is to fill the kettle, put it on the spirit-lamp, and then have a game till it boils. What do you say?"

Joyous agreement. And the game that followed was as exciting as auntie's games always were. At last she said: "Now for the tea! If you will go and lay the cloth I'll bring the hot water. There is a nice flat piece of grass under that tree."

Delighted at being allowed to investigate the basket the children set out the contents: Bread and butter, cakes, buns, plums, and *the* tarts!

"Now for the cups. Oh, be careful with the milk-bottle! Oh, I say, I've broken a saucer!" Burton caught his breath in dismay.

"There's a cup broken, too," put in Bennie. "I did n't do that, though! It was done."

"I shall have to tell!" gulped Burton.

"Say it was done before you touched it," suggested Egerton.

Burton opened his eyes. "Why, she'd b'lieve me!" he blurted.

Egerton looked puzzled. Surely that was a reason for concealing his accident, not against it. What odd chaps the bees were!

"I—I'm very sorry, auntie!" said the boy. "I'm very sorry!"

She put down her kettle. "What a pity! Never mind, dear! Accidents will happen. Pass the teapot."

"There's a cup broken, too," said Bennie. "But we did n't do it."

"Dear me! That's a bother! I suppose I must have done it myself. I never heard it crack, though. Well, I shall have to go shares with one of you. Now, we're ready. Pass the bread and butter, Bob. I'm nearly starving. What do you feel like?"

The onslaught on the meal showed that all were in like condition. Egerton alone ate slowly, and did n't seem hungry.

"Would you like some cake?" asked auntie, wondering at this lack of appetite.

The boy accepted, ate a mouthful or two still more slowly, and then dropped it and burst out crying.

"I broke the cup," he sobbed. "It was n't you! I looked in the basket when you were all hiding, and it tumbled. I broke it, and I wish I had n't!"

The bees looked at him in sympathetic silence.

Poor Egerton! Fancy having a thing like that on one's conscience, and not daring to confess! How dreadful! No wonder he did n't care about bread and butter, or even cake. Poor Egerton!

Miss Burnham glanced curiously at the sobbing child. Surely Egerton had not his mother's love of crooked ways. There was no need for him to have confessed; no one suspected, and yet he had felt the burden of his wrongdoing. If he had but proper care and training he might yet turn out an honest, straightforward man. What a shame it was to ruin him!

With a greater liking than she had ever before felt for him she drew the repentant sinner to her side. "It is a pity you did that, is n't it? See how it has spoiled your pleasure! You have been afraid ever since of a scolding, have n't you? But, never mind, now! You have said you are sorry, so we won't speak of it any more; we must n't have any crying at our picnic, must we?"

"I was sorry before, and I'm scrier than ever now!" sobbed the child, under this forgiveness. "You can have my mug, and I'll go without!"

"I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll take your mug, and as you and Burton have broken my cup and saucer between you, you shall go shares."

"All right, auntie!" agreed Burton, eagerly. "That will be much better, 'cause you would n't give a 'thank you' for tea what's not hot and strong, would you?"

Auntie laughed. "Yes, that will be best. There! don't think about it any more, Eg. Let us talk of something else. Bennie, would you like a piece of

cake? You can have bread and butter if you prefer it, you know."

Fancy any one choosing bread and butter when cake was offered! The bees burst out laughing at the joke, and, after a minute's hesitation, Egerton dried his eyes, and joined them in rather subdued fashion, and the meal proceeded harmoniously.

"Now for our tarts!" said the bees, gleefully. "You shall have them all! every bit, auntie!"

The unfortunate lady looked at the repulsive objects with outward gratitude. "Oh, bees! I could n't enjoy them if you did n't go shares. I'll have one taste of each."

How generous she was!

Protesting that it would give them greater pleasure to see her eat them than to do so themselves, the three yet admitted a hankering to taste their own cookery.

Cutting off as small portions as she dared she got them down somehow.

"Do you like them, auntie? Are they good?" demanded the eager children. "Would n't you really like a bit more?"

Miss Burnham was a truthful woman! She washed down the horrors with a long drink of tea. "Darlings, I never tasted anything like them before!"

Could praise be higher!

At length the meal was finished, and every scrap consumed, for Poll, who had lain down close by, pretending, with the manners of a perfect gentleman, to take a nap till his turn came, and only raising one eye occasionally to see how much longer it would be, polished off the remnants as soon as he was called.

"We ought to be moving, chicks. Let us pack up, and start for home."

The walk home was as pleasant as the walk there; nothing more could be said about it.

"We 've had a nice day, have n't we?" said auntie, entering the house after seeing their guest off.

"Lovely!" responded the three. "We always do have lovely days with you, auntie."

"Bell!" said grandpa, coming to the door. "I want to speak to you."

The bees did not hear what he said, but auntie answered aloud:

"Certainly not, father! I have not seen him."

Again grandpa spoke in an undertone. Auntie flushed with surprise.

"Seen Philip coming in here? Nonsense! He must be mistaken!"

Both lowered their voices, but the children looked at one another in horror. What with pastry-making in the morning, and the picnic in the afternoon, they had quite forgotten to take down Uncle Philip's usual supplies. And now, apparently, he had been to the house; doubtless with intent to carry them off. They must get something, and run to the island and try to pacify him. Hastening to their play-room they found their supper laid, and took a thick piece of bread and butter in each hand. Shouting to Poll to accompany them—they never ventured to the island without him, if he could possibly be found—they hurried down the field, with their hearts beating painfully.

Poll was tired, and entering his home lay down, just as two men emerged from the bushes close by.

"Hullo!" said one. "What does this mean?"

"They are called the bees, sir," said the other.
 "Pretty little chaps, are n't they?"

"What are they doing here? What's this?"

"Poll's kennel," said Burton. "This is Poll."

"He is n't a beauty," said the man.

"He's better than beautiful: he's good," said Burton, gravely. "He lives here 'cause grandma does n't like dogs; but auntie is going to try and get him a home near us before the winter comes."

The two men spoke together for a while. Then one said, "Have you seen a man about here to-day, bees?"

"Only Mr. Coverdale, this morning," said Burton.

"And grandpa," added Bennie.

"Oh, and we saw him when we were starting on our picnic," put in Bob, nodding at the one who had known them.

"No one else?"

"No."

"Are you speaking the truth?" demanded the man sternly.

"'Course!" said Burton, hotly. "We don't tell stories!"

"I should hope not! Do you know who I am?"

"No; but I know who he is," said Bob, pointing to the other.

"Who is he?"

"He's the man who tried to kiss Minnie, and she said she'd give him a clout on the head if he dare to put his filthy paws on her again."

Five minutes later a young man's blushes were slowly subsiding as he stared after his superior's departing form, and mentally resolved never in the

future to attempt blandishments with a maid if small boys were about; a haggard-faced man was still crouching inside the kennel, devouring bread and butter, and making up his mind that the place was getting too hot to hold him; and three tired, hungry little bees were wearily toiling up the field, prepared to go supperless to bed.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PANORAMA

"MINNIE, do you know what a pannylamma is?"
"Of course I do, Master Bees. It 's a lot of pictures, and a grand gentleman in a shirt-front, with a long stick, telling you what they are about."

"We 're going to one to-night. Auntie Bell 's going to take us."

"My! Some boys are lucky, are n't they?"

"We 're not going to start till after dark, and we 're going in a cab, and when we come back it will be late at night."

"My gracious! Whoever heard of such a thing!"

"What else does a pannylamma do 'sides having pickshers?"

"Lots of things! The pictures move along, and trains run out of them."

"Really run? Not pretending? Oh, Minnie! how can they?"

The bees' eyes were wide with excitement.

"I don't know how they can, Master Bees, but they do; that 's a fact. And they have cathedrals, and light 'em up—pretty, I can tell you!—and sunrise on Mong Blong, and the way the birds sing and the cascades fall—a fair treat!"

"Oh, Minnie! And what 's Mong Blong?"

"A mountain, Master Bees. You 'll find it on the map. And storms at sea, fit to make you sea-sick only to look at them."

"What else, Minnie? Go on, dear!"

"Every now and then the gentleman says, 'In this scene, ladies and gentlemen, will be introduced some performing animals, or some one will sing, or some gymnastics, or juggling.' In fact, one can never tell what won't come."

At the recapitulation of these marvels the bees danced with excitement, and begged for more; but Auntie Bell's step was heard, and Minnie roused to the knowledge that she was wasting her time.

"Run away now, dears, or I shan't get my work done, and then auntie will have to stay and help me instead of taking you to-night. And that would be a state of things!"

One not to be contemplated for a moment. "Oh, you 'll work hard, won't you, Minnie?" they begged. "It would be dreadful not to go now. Nothing would make up for it. You 'll put your best leg foremost, won't you, dear?"

The bees talked of little else for the remainder of the day. They related all to Poll, confided the great news to the man whom Minnie had promised to "clout," and who was still mysteriously hanging about their field, and even, in their excitement, told Uncle Philip about it, when they took their lunch to him.

But Uncle Philip was not a man who could sympathise with the joys of others—his own troubles pressed too heavily. He merely grunted, asked a few questions, and then was much more interested in knowing if they had seen either of the men who had

spoken to them on the previous evening. Hearing that they had, he immediately retired into hiding again, told them to run away, and forbade them, on the pain of his severest displeasure, to mention his name to a soul.

"'Cept Auntie Bell," said Boh, retreating, but having no mind to let that exception be forgotten.

Uncle Philip merely scowled. He was too weary and dispirited to argue the matter. Besides, the children had kept faith so far. If he could not escape soon it would almost be better to be captured than to live the life he had done for the past few days, tired, wretched, and dependent on three small boys for supplies. Not altogether, though. Auntie had missed several things from the larder lately, and was beginning to wonder if Minnie were quite as honest as she looked. He knew nothing of this, but if he had would merely have rejoiced in that it diverted suspicion. "Each for himself" was Philip Burnham's motto.

What a long, long day it was! The time from breakfast to dinner crawled as it had never crawled before; from dinner to tea was even worse. Several times the bees listened at the clock to see if it had stopped. But at length came the welcome summons to dress.

They were upstairs before the words were well spoken.

Auntie followed. It had been a long, long day to her, too. Grandpa had been harder and sterner, and grandma more fretful, than usual. Shame and distress were upon them, and they showed it according to their different natures, and their daughter suffered with and from them. So weary and dispirited did she feel that she actually contemplated postponing the promised

treat, but the eager, excited little faces were too much for her. She could not disappoint them, and endeavoured to throw off her depression, and respond to their chatter. Fortunately they had so much to say that her silence passed unnoticed.

"We never, never had such times before we came here!" they assured her. "It is ever so much nicer being your little boys than living at that other house, auntie."

She kissed the happy children, and part of the heavy load lifted.

"You may run into the garden and look for the cab while I dress. Don't go far away."

"May we go just as far as the cross-roads, auntie? S'pose it turned up a wrong one in the dark, and we never got there after all!"

She laughed at the awful suggestion. "Very well! But no farther."

During the next half-hour the bees passed a harrowing time. Every sound was construed into the rumble of wheels, and the times they imagined lights were innumerable. So close was the watch they kept that not a kitten could have slipped past unnoticed. Only the feeling that it was really too dreadful a possibility to contemplate prevented them being certain that the man had either forgotten or had gone to the wrong house. At last came sounds unmistakable. The three broke into excited shouts.

"This is the way, driver! This is the way. Don't go up the wrong road. It's us what's going to the pannylamma—us, and auntie!"

The man had been to the house several times, and the bees, once seen, were not easily forgotten. He

pulled up, good-naturedly. "Oh, it's you, is it? Where are you going?"

"To the pannylamma. Oh, here's auntie! Come along, auntie! We've got the cab, but he's very late. Drive fast, or we shall never be in time!"

The maligned driver smiled as a lady hurried down the road, closely veiled, with a shawl thrown round her shoulders and the lower part of her face. She gave directions, and the cabful of excitement went its way.

"Auntie—" began Burton.

"Don't talk to me, bees! I have had a bad toothache all day, and just now it is racking!" came a muffled voice from under the shawl.

"Oh, poor auntie! We're so sorry!" said the children.

"What have you taken for it?" inquired the doctor.

"Let me alone, bees! Look out of the window."

The sweetest temper gives way under toothache, and there was a suspicion of irritation in the tones which was not surprising. The bees knew the symptoms, and, like wise children, obeyed. Nurse had been a martyr to neuralgia, and when the attacks were on it was safer to be a model of good behaviour.

Suddenly the cab stopped, the door opened, and a man looked in. The bees knew him, and as two or three meetings were usually sufficient to put them on friendly terms with people, they greeted "Minnie's clouted man," as they called him, with eagerness.

"We're off to the pannylamma—auntie and us. Don't stop us, or we shall be late."

"Shut that door!" commanded the considerate doctor. "Auntie Bell has a toothache, and a person who has toothache must be kept free from draffs."

The man obeyed with a smothered chuckle, muttered something apologetic about "only doing his duty," and vanished.

Very soon they were in the streets, among the traffic, and the bees commented on everybody and everything.

The cab drew up before a brilliantly-lighted building. Breathless with excitement, they followed into the vestibule, and watched the process of ticket-buying. Then they were inside. Then auntie paused and spoke to an attendant. "Do you mind seeing these little boys to their seats? Bees, I must run to the chemist. My tooth is dreadful! I won't be long."

The attendant looked down in amused astonishment at the three who were politely saluting her. To the best seats that were left did she take them, feeling amply repaid by their eager thanks.

The curtain went up, and a tall gentleman, yes! in a white shirt-front, and, gracious! with the very stick, came out and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, with your kind permission I will conduct you on our journey. We will take our places at once in the train."

The train ran into the picture—really ran, not pretending—just as Minnie had said, waited a bit, and then ran out again. The pictures began to move. The bees clutched the backs of the next row of seats with hands that were wet with excitement, and their eyes glued to the stage. They were oblivious to everything save the scenes before them, till—just as they had been told—the gentleman remarked, "In this scene, ladies and gentlemen, the Bounding Brothers will introduce their first-class performance."

The stage was left empty for a minute or two, and

the bees came back to earth, and commented on auntie's continued absence.

"She's rather a long time, is n't she?" said Burton, peering about in the dim light.

"She'll be losing all the fun!" said Bennie.

"I 'spect that stupid chemist man can't cure her in a hurry," observed Bob. "When I'm a man I shall say to poorly people, 'Drink this stuff, and you will be all right in a minute.' And they will be."

Dr. Bob's list of patients would be extensive.

Further remarks were cut short by several gentlemen and one small boy entering with bounds and leaps, and again everything was forgotten. How they envied that small boy as he was tossed from one to the other! How they admired him when he sprang up a perfect pyramid of brothers, and stood on the shoulders of the topmost man, with his arms folded; and, when the pyramid broke up, and everybody tumbled in different directions, and performed a series of somersaults before standing in a row and making their bow, they cheered till they had no breath left.

"I wish auntie had seen it!" said Burton. "And I wish she'd come!"

Again marvels began, and again they glared at the stage. They were not so absorbed this time, however. Every now and then the pictures failed to rivet their attention, and glances, which were becoming uneasy, were cast about the audience. And still there was no sign. At last it was only in extra exciting places that they paid attention. Surely panoramas were somewhat overrated! Oh, yes! they were interesting!—at least, some parts were; but not quite so much as they had expected. Where was Auntie Bell? The build-

ing was very large, and very full of people, quite crowded, in fact; and yet, it was funny! but how very lonely little bees could feel when one person was missing. They were rapidly growing into the state of mind of the lady who lamented the absence of Robin Adair. Gradually their view became more jaundiced. Why was that man tossing balls into the air? Stupid thing to toss balls! Oh, pretty enough, but what was the good! Humph! one had fallen! Why did he come there if he did n't know his business? Now a silly lady was singing a sillier song! Give them Auntie Bell for songs! Hers were something like! Sometimes they made them laugh, and sometimes sad; sometimes they had to creep close and hug her, and sometimes they fairly had to dance! But as for that thing on the stage!—thank goodness, she was going at last! Actually kissing her hand to a thousand people! Gracious! Bold-faced jig! The bees turned their backs on such on-goings, and for the rest of the performance spent their time in vain searchings.

"P'r'aps she 's waiting for us outside," suggested Burton anxiously.

"Or maybe she does n't know which seat we are in," added Bennie.

At last it was over. The band crashed out the last bars of "God save the King," the lights on the stage went down, and those of the rest of the building went up.

"We must go and look for her," said Burton.

No one took any notice of the forlorn little figures who joined the crowd going out. They scanned every woman who passed. Some were too tall, some too

short, some too stout, and some too thin; and all were too ugly. None—none had that combination of grace and beauty, elegance and loveliness which made up an Auntie Bell. None brought peace and comfort to three lonely hearts.

Then they were in the street in search of the chemist's shop, holding each other's hands tightly. One or two turns, and the bewildered children found themselves in quiet roads, with not a soul to be seen. They endeavoured to retrace their steps, but were soon hopelessly lost. The houses were without lights in them, night was all around, and not a person seemed to know or care that lonely bees were tramping the wide world in search of a vanished auntie. They were tired now, as well as uneasy.

"We had better go home, p'r'aps," suggested Burton bravely.

But which was the way? The children knew little of the town, and the part in which they were wandering was strange. If only a policeman were to turn up they might ask for help, but no policeman appeared. Fortunately they all agreed as to the direction. Unfortunately all were wrong. Steadily they marched on, feeling every moment more desolate.

The darkest hour ever comes before the dawn, and when hope was very low a possible rescue appeared.

"It 's the poorly gentleman!" said Burton eagerly. "Run, bees!"

Mr. Coverdale, walking towards his lodgings, was suddenly seized by six hands, while three voices demanded, "Where 's Auntie Bell?"

"Hullo!" he ejaculated. "Why, it 's the little bees!"

"Where's Auntie Bell?" demanded all four this time.

"I don't know," said Mr. Coverdale in surprise. "I don't possess her. I wish I did."

"We can't find her," said the children. "She's lost!"

"Lost!" realising the seriousness of the case—three small boys wandering the streets alone at that hour of the night! "Lost! Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

The bees had recovered their spirits at the sight of a familiar face, and a perfect torrent burst from them in answer.

Auntie Bell, pannylammas, cabs, Bounding Brothers, toothaches, and chemists were mixed up in inextricable confusion. At first Mr. Coverdale meditated letting them run themselves down, but, finding that it was going to be a long business, interrupted.

"Here! wait a bit, bees! Who is the eldest?"

The stream stopped immediately. "Oh!" with awful reproach. "No one's an eldest. We're a triplet."

"I beg your pardon. I thought perhaps one was a few minutes older than the others. My mistake!"

"We're all even," they assured him.

"Well, who *feels* like the eldest?"

They all felt like the eldest, and they all felt like the youngest, and, for the matter of that, they all felt the middle-aged one, too. In the matter of years, or rather minutes and experience, no one felt one whit more or less than the others. As one man they stood or fell.

Mr. Coverdale was reduced to question and answer.

"Where have you been?"

"To the pannylamma; and those Bounding Brothers——"

"Stop a bit! Who took you?"

"Auntie Bell and a cab."

"When did you lose her?"

"Quite at the beginning. She had a toothache and went to the chemist."

"What did you do?"

"Went to our seats."

Light was beginning to dawn. "You mean you were left at the panorama while auntie went for something for her tooth?"

"Yes; and she 's never come back."

"Have you been at the panorama all this time?"

"Yes, till the people came out, and then we came out too, and have been looking for her. Where can she be?"

Mr. Coverdale was as puzzled as the children, and somewhat alarmed, too. He could imagine no combination of circumstances, save an injury, which would permit any one to leave the little ones to their own devices in a place of entertainment, and to find their own way home afterwards. His imagination went towards hospitals, but he could hardly go and inquire on the evidence of such young children. And then, looking at them again, and realising how very small they were, he began to suspect some natural mistake had arisen. At all events the best thing to be done seemed to be to get them home as fast as possible.

"Look here, bees! We 'll take a cab and go home. Perhaps we shall find Auntie Bell there."

"Gone without us?" exclaimed Burton. "Oh, she

would n't! We have n't been naughty, have we, bees?"

"Do let us look for her," urged Bennie. "Think of poor auntie walking about all alone in the dark without us."

"And with a toothache," added Bob.

"Where are we to look?"

But this was beyond them. "Let us go home, and ask if grandpa knows anything of her. If he does n't, I'll come down again and seek everywhere."

The tired children agreed.

A cab was soon found, and three very sad faces ranged opposite Mr. Coverdale.

"It seems as though we were leaving her," said Burton tremulously. "I don't half like it."

In dread lest they should insist on a return, he began to question them about the panorama. They answered politely, but with no interest. Auntie Bell filled their hearts and minds to the exclusion of everything else.

"How is it," asked Burton, "that a ride in a cab which is short and nice when we are with a Auntie Bell is long and nasty when we are with——"

"A Mr. Coverdale?" suggested that gentleman.

"I don't think it's specially you," sighed the boy. "Any one who was n't her would be as bad."

"I expect it's because you love her so dearly."

"Life's a growling wilderness when she is lost," said Bennie moodily.

The two nodded. Bennie had put their feelings into words exactly.

Mr. Coverdale nodded sympathetically too. He understood the feeling very well. He, too, had felt

an emptiness in life at one time, and though years of hard work had apparently filled it, now that the work was over, and he had time to think again, he found that the blank was not filled, only covered over.

"Who taught you that, Bee?"

"Minnie's young man said it."

The drive was a miserable one, and all four heaved sighs of relief when the cab drew up.

At the sound of the wheels some one opened the door—some one with a white, frightened face and anxious eyes—at the sight of whom the bees broke into a simultaneous shriek of mingled rapture and reproach.

"Auntie! auntie! why did you leave us?"

"Bees! where have you been?"

Auntie sank down on the nearest chair, as though unable to stand another moment, and the three cast themselves upon her.

Mr. Coverdale looked on with much approval. It struck him that the man who had restored her bees to her would probably be thanked warmly. It also struck him that blue eyes could look very soft and sweet when their owner was grateful.

"Where have you been, bees?" auntie repeated, when she could speak steadily.

"With this—this poorly gentleman," responded the three, beginning their tale at the wrong end.

Auntie looked up quickly, and Mr. Coverdale became aware that blue eyes could glare as well as look soft, and that savagery as well as sweetness lurked in their depths.

"May I ask for what reason you took them away?" she inquired.

Some time ago Mr. Coverdale had been in a very tight corner, with twenty yelling Red Indians thirsting for his blood. His present feelings brought that forgotten scene back to memory. He was considered a brave man, and on that occasion had stood firm, and had gallantly encouraged his comrades; but on the present his courage evaporated, and he felt a cowardly desire to flee.

"I did n't! Indeed I did n't!" he protested, amazed at finding himself a culprit instead of a hero.

"We found him when we were looking for you," explained Burton, "and he said we had better come home, and brought us here in a cab."

To his relief, auntie's animosity fled as suddenly as it had arisen. Again his sensations reminded him of those with which he had watched his enemies take to their heels.

"I found them wandering the town in search of you," he explained.

"Wandering the town! Oh, bees! How did you get there?"

"It was after the pannylamma, auntie. We waited till the end, and then looked for you," said Burton.

"Is your toothache better?" asked Bob.

"Why did you leave us?" Bennie whispered reproachfully.

"I don't know what you mean, children. It was you who left me."

Before she could say more grandpa came out. His face was dark and stern, and his voice angry. "Where have you been?"

"To the pannylamma, with Auntie Bell."

They were beginning to weary of this incessant ques-

tion. Now that the excitement was over they were feeling tired—very tired. They had expected to be petted, not blamed, and grandpa's anger was unnerving.

"Be silent!" he roared, in sudden fury. "Stop that absurd way of all speaking at once. Burton, you answer!" and he pointed to Bennie. "Where have you been?"

Bewildered though they were, the habit of a lifetime, even so short a lifetime, stood fast, and Bob replied:

"To the pannylamma, with Auntie Bell."

Grandpa gave a discomfited start. He never could identify those children.

"Don't tell lies, sir!"

"Are n't telling lies!" protested Bob.

"And don't answer me like that!" shouted grandpa.

"Oh, father! they are so little!" pleaded auntie.

"Don't frighten them. Bees, tell auntie, darlings, where you have been."

"To the pannylamma, auntie," said the three beginning to struggle with sobs.

"By yourselves?"

"No auntie. 'Course not! With you."

"Oh, bees! Be brave, and confess."

"That will do, Bell!" said grandpa grimly. "We have had enough of this. Bring my cane."

The children grew hot and cold, and pressed closer against auntie. What had they done? What did it all mean? They were unconscious of having done wrong, but surely they must have been very wicked, for not only was grandpa angry, but even auntie—that closest and dearest of friends—was looking at them with sorrowful disapproval.

"Grandpa," said Bob valiantly, "it's true; it really is!"

"Father, let them tell their own tale. Please let them."

"Nonsense, Bell! You'll spoil them! They are quite old enough to know what lies are. Bring my cane at once! They shall have the soundest thrashing they ever had in their lives."

Auntie blazed suddenly, like a hen defending her chickens. "I will not, father! You promised to leave them to me if I took charge of them, and I will not have them punished until I know whether they deserve it. I can't understand it! Bees, tell me the whole matter from the beginning."

Grandpa had never seen his daughter like this before. Her eyes were sparkling, her cheeks crimson, as she stood and defied him. He could not have been more astonished if the proverbial worm had turned.

Mr. Coverdale, a silent and somewhat embarrassed onlooker at this family affair, nodded secret approval. What an old tartar it was! Poor little chaps! Bell had plenty of pluck.

Stammering and hesitating, and feeling themselves the sinners grandpa was assuming them to be, though totally unable to understand it, the children got through their story somehow. At the end they appealed.

"It's true, is n't it, auntie?"

But their last hope failed.

Slowly and sorrowfully she answered: "I have never even seen the cab, and have been looking for you the whole of the evening."

CHAPTER XVIII

ESTRANGEMENT—AND RECONCILIATION

THE next day there were anger, trouble, and misery in the house. After the shock of auntie's speech the bees had collapsed. Worn out with excitement, anxiety, and weariness they simply tumbled down, little heaps of tiredness. Further questioning was useless. Minnie was summoned, and as soon as possible they were all slipped into bed.

It was late next morning when they awoke—awoke to the knowledge that grandpa was angry, grandma cross and more than usually fretful, and Auntie Bell ill in bed—driven there by their own sinful behaviour—so grandma said, as she sharply bade them go and play, and on no account to enter that room.

Miserably they wandered about, and at last sought Minnie. But no help was forthcoming in that quarter. Red-eyed and grumpy, Minnie had her own troubles that morning, and she briefly told them to go away, she could n't be bothered with them.

Auntie Bell poorly—Minnie cross—what would happen to them next? Too dispirited to argue, they turned away, but were called back.

"By the way, Master Bees, have you ever taken things out of the larder?"

"No, Minnie; 'cept when you told us."

"You 're sure?"

"Quite sure! Only when you've said, 'Help yourselves.'"

"It's a mystery," muttered Minnie; "a mystery! Go away and play, Master Bees."

No one wanted them. Every one said: "Go and play"; and how on earth were they to play with their hearts full of wretchedness? Perhaps doing their duty would help them to tide over the time.

"Can we have some lunch, Minnie?"

She stared. "Well, for appetites give me small boys! I should have thought you might have spent your time in being sorry, rather than in eating. Here you are!"

Misjudged again! How could they say that it was not for themselves that the meal was required? Life was very hard.

The first ray of comfort they had received that morning stole into their souls when they found Uncle Philip was not at home.

"Good riddance of bad rubbish!" observed Burton gloomily, as they put their lunch in a certain hole where Poll could not get it, and which was the recognised place when their pensioner happened to be absent.

Slowly they wandered back to what they now considered the safe side of the stream's bed, and sat down to reflect. It was not the fact of their loneliness that was troubling them; it was not even that they were looked upon as criminals of the deepest dye. Far down in their hearts the dreadful thought, not yet put into words, was the feeling that Auntie Bell had failed them!—that she had—how could they say it? how

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could they even think it?—*told a story!* She whom they had looked upon as the one perfect creature on earth was showing herself weak and faulty, and their world was empty. This was Burton's and Bennie's view, and the little fellows were proportionately wretched. They were struggling with a child's first disillusionment, and their hearts ached sorely under the process. Bob looked upon matters in another light.

It was strange how the bees' feelings varied, revealing the fundamental difference that existed under their surface likeness.

Impetuous Burton saw the one terrible fact of untruthfulness; nothing could explain, nothing extenuate. His idol had slipped from her pedestal, he could not set it up again, and his heart was broken. The little fellow was terrified at his own feelings, which he could not understand. He did n't want to climb on auntie's lap; he did n't want to go and ask her how she was, and say he was sorry; he did n't want to see her; he did n't—no, he did n't love her. What a wicked, wicked boy he was!

Bennie, too, admitted the horrible fact of her falsity. She was not what he had thought her. He had been deceived in her. But it did not cause him to cease to love her. To love once was to love always with Bennie. Good or bad, false or true, faithful or unfaithful, she was still Auntie Bell. Compassion might take the place of admiration, pity of respect, but still he would remain staunch. Unlike Burton he wanted to be with her, to put his arms round her, to comfort her in her distress. "Poor Auntie Bell!" the child thought, vaguely sorry and bewildered.

From such trouble Bob was free. With him, to love was to trust. No hearsay evidence would have weight with the doctor where his affections were engaged; through good report and ill he would remain confident. He would be slow even to trust his own senses. It would be long before doubt could force an entry into his perfect confidence. But if once he found himself deceived it would go hardly with him. He ranged matters as well as he could in his childish mind. Auntie Bell said she had n't been to the panny-lamma with them. That was one fact. They knew she had. That was fact number two. Then followed two impossibilities. The first was that auntie should tell a story; the second was that they should. What was left? One of them must have made a mistake—not told a story—made a mistake. Everybody made mistakes at times. He did n't think it was them. Could it be auntie? How was it possible for an auntie to go to town with three bees and not know a thing about it? Or, on the other hand, how was it possible for three bees to think that an auntie had been with them when she was at home? Over this mystery he pondered till the explanation flashed into his mind.

"It 's a dirrylum, bees! How silly we were not to think of it before! It 's a dirrylum!"

The two looked at him doubtfully. With great satisfaction he proceeded.

"Don't you 'member when I had a dirrylum that time I was so ill? You said I talked all kind of things, and got out of bed and went down-stairs, and I said I did n't; and you thought I was a story-teller, and I thought you were; and then the doctor told me it was a dirrylum, and when people had dirrylums

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they did n't know what they did. That 's it! Auntie had a dirrylum!"

Bennie brightened hopefully. Was it possible? Burton refused to be comforted by any such specious argument.

"You were in bed, ill, with a white hankershiff round your head."

"And is n't auntie ill in bed? And how do we know she has n't got a white hankershiff on her head?"

But Burton shook his head. "It 's no good, Bob. *Auntie told a story!*"

There! The dreadful thought was put into words.

Bob started to his feet, red with wrath. "Burton!" Even before he had found the explanation he had known there was one. No thought of doubt had entered his mind. And now to hear that awful accusation hurled at her, actually by one of her own bees! For a moment he was stunned. Then, "Burton, I 'll fight you!"

The children had for the time changed places. Though always ready to enjoy their own tumbles and struggles, Bob was not fond of fighting. When necessary he went in for it with his usual dogged determination; but it was business, not pleasure. And now he was shaking with anger, and clenching his fists, ready to do battle for auntie's honour. Burton, on the contrary, loved it; in play or in earnest he was usually ready to pit himself again another. But now he had no spirit left. Shaking his head, he sobbed, "I don't want to fight. I don't want anything, 'cept for auntie to be like she was before, and she never will again."

Bob looked at him in perplexity. Burton crying!

Burton refusing to fight! What on earth was the matter? He turned to Bennie. "You don't think that—that—I mean, you don't think the same as Burt?"

He really could n't utter the words.

"I don't know," said Bennie slowly. "I did! But I did n't think of the dirrylum."

Hope had risen. Bennie was not one to judge rashly. Every opportunity for explanation would be given. He feared, but waited.

Bob could n't understand it. Auntie! Their auntie! It was impossible! quite impossible!

"Let's go and see her," said Bennie.

"Grandma said we were n't to," protested Burton, wondering why he did n't wish to go.

"I know," said Bennie gravely. "But I don't feel like being a good obedient little boy to-day. I feel like being a bad one."

"Hurray!" shouted Bob. "Come on! So do I!"

The two started off, followed reluctantly by Burton. He had not arrived at the point of acting alone, but he wished they would not go.

And so it happened that auntie, struggling with a racking headache in a darkened room, with the aid of wet cloths wrung out and laid on her forehead, found, on opening her eyes, the trio standing watching her. Bob had given a triumphant glance at his brothers. What had he told them? Dirrylum, without a doubt! Here was proof positive for those who wanted proof. He did n't! But neither was thinking about proofs. At the first sight of that sweet, pale, suffering face they forgot everything but that it was auntie, their own Auntie Bell, and that their wickedness had brought her to this pass.

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As soon as they saw she was awake they swarmed the bed.

"Oh, auntie! poor auntie! we're so sorry!" said Bennie.

"You do look bad, precious!" said Burton.

The doctor gave an indignant glance at them. What did they mean by depressing the patient in this manner? Such a foolish thing to do!

"Dear, dear!" he said, with careful mimicry of their own doctor's jocular manner and words. "Dear, dear, dear! Somebody has been misb'aving herself. Tut, tut! this 'll never do, young lady! Feel ill? Nonsense! Just a bit off a colour! We shall have you caking about the house as blisk as a bee before the week's out!"

In spite of blinding pain auntie smiled. Her bees were so funny, and so dear. Bob was dipping the cloth in water again and pressing it on her head, Bennie cuddling her hand, and Burton admiringly stroking the "lauburn tresses" that lay scattered on the pillow. They had forgotten all the falseness hidden under that fair face, and, remembering only the wickedness ascribed to them, implored pardon. The fact that they had no idea in what the said wickedness lay did not in the slightest degree hinder them abasing themselves utterly. Their part was to be sorry, not to make inquiries as to what they had done. "Theirs was not to question why."

Unfortunately auntie's reply brought the other side of the matter to their minds. "I thought I could have trusted my bees. I never thought they would have told stories!" Then, telling herself that they were so very little, that they had n't understood, she added,

"Never mind, now. You must tell me all about it when I am better."

Burton slipped from the bed, growing hot. He had forgotten for the moment, but recollection brought back both misery and anger.

"Auntie," he said defiantly, "it's wicked—at least it's naughty—I mean it is n't good for grown-ups to tell stories either."

He was shaking with horror at his own temerity, but, nevertheless, had the courage of his convictions.

Bennie grew hot, too, with compassion. Poor auntie! it was a shame! Burton ought n't to have said it! Things like this should be covered up, and put on one side—never even thought of again, if possible. Poor auntie! He stroked her hand softly.

But Bob was wrathful. "Burton!" he said angrily. "You're a cad! Never mind, precious! I'll give him what for outside. It's a dirrylum. It is n't your fault. It's a dirrylum, dear."

Auntie looked puzzled, but was feeling too ill to get to the bottom of the matter. "Run away, bees. Grandma will be cross if she finds you here."

Her perceptions were keen, and she noted the change in the children's manners. Bob hugged her with his usual loving ardour, and whispered to her to "Get better, precious!" but Bennie's kiss had a subtle difference, and the pity in the child's tone was obvious as he said: "We won't ever talk of it again, auntie. We'll put it all behind us, and start afresh, darling."

They were her own words after some little wrongdoing on his part, but the application bewildered her.

As for Burton his avoidance was evident. Auntie

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had never thought her bees sulky, but what else could cause that misery in the child's face? Oh, dear! how her head ached!

The children decamped, and listened with polite indifference to a sharp scolding from grandma, whom they met on the stairs.

Once outside Bob said firmly, "I'm going to fight, Burton."

Again the soldier declined. "I'm not! What's the good of fighting? What's the good of anything?"

Bob reflected. "Well, you've to stop saying that what you have said twice. If you say it again I'll fight whether you want or not, so there! You'll be ever so sorry when you find out I'm right! You'll be sorrier than any thumps from me can make you."

"I won't!" said Burton gloomily. "I'd be glad! I'd be gladder than anything else could make me."

"Let's have a game," proposed Bob.

Having nothing on his mind now that he had confessed, his spirits rose, and he felt ready for amusement. But the others were too downhearted to care about a game. They linked arms, and walked down the field. They were companions in distress. For once the bees were divided. *They* were unhappy. Bob was not. Nevertheless the latter felt keenly that they were shutting him out. He thrust his hands in his pockets, and sighed heavily. What a lot of trouble there was in the world!

"I don't know how we're going to live to be old if every day is going to be as long as yesterday and today," said Burton gloomily. "I b'lieve I'll die young."

Dinner brought little comfort. Auntie was still in bed, and grandpa and grandma could not be bothered with them without their daughter's superintendence. So they dined alone, with Minnie to wait on them. She was still so grumpy that presently Bennie dropped his spoon to inquire dolefully:

"Don't you love us any more, Minnie?"

Grumpiness gave way under this appeal. "Of course I do, Master Bee, darling. But I'm in trouble."

"Everybody's in trouble!" sighed Burton.

"And auntie's in bed," added Bob, who looked upon that as the cause.

Had she been well the children would have been dispatched to lie down for an hour, which would have done them good. There being no one to look after them they wandered out again, feeling tired and cross after their late hours and dissipation of the evening before. Games palled, and they loafed round in wretched style for the remainder of the afternoon. The bell for dressing for tea was a relief. At all events that and the meal would take up a certain amount of time, and then they could go to bed.

"Better keep out of grandpa's way," advised Minnie, as she finished brushing their hair. "Go to the playroom, Master Bees, dears, till tea is ready."

At the door of the room Bob broke into a joyous shout, and rushed forward.

"Auntie Bell! Are you better, precious? Are you feeling quite yourself again?"

He had his arms round her, hugging her hard.

"Is your head quite well, auntie?" said Bennie, following suit.

"My head is, darlings," said auntie, responding to

these demonstrations. "But it has left me feeling rather weak and battered."

"I know, dear!" assented the thoughtful doctor. "Dicky on the trotters, eh?"

Miss Burnham sank back in her chair, feeling as though her symptoms had been described exactly, and shaking with the weakness that overcame her—or something else!

"Auntie," asked Bob, "who does one feel like when one does n't feel like oneself?"

But auntie ignored this profound inquiry. She was looking with sorrowful wonder at Bennie and Burton.

The former stood by her, clasping her arm, and murmuring, "Poor auntie! poor auntie!" with the same loving pity she had noticed before, and his face full of sorrow. Burton still waited by the door, making no effort to join the others. There was a cold, empty feeling in his little heart, which used to feel so warm and happy when she was near, and he was struggling not to burst into tears.

"Is n't Burton coming to speak to me?" she asked sadly.

He moved slowly forward, his cheeks crimson and his eyes downcast, making no response to her kiss.

Auntie looked appealingly at the others.

"Dirrylum, auntie! Don't you bother, precious! He's a donkey!" said Bob, with his arms still round her.

"Never mind, dear," said Bennie, gently. "Let's talk of something else."

Auntie did n't know what to make of them. She

had found the children so easy to manage hitherto. Even in their occasional naughtinesses they had been so lovable and loving that she had found it hard to punish them. When she had placed them on chairs, they had urged her to kiss them before leaving, and assure them that it would be all right when this was over. When she had smacked them they had clasped the still reddened hands round her neck, and told her not to mind, she had n't really hurt; nurse was the one to lay it on. And now only Bob remained loyal, for Bennie's compassion hurt almost as much as Burton's avoidance. Yet she could not be angry—both the little fellows looked so wretched.

"What is it, bees?" she asked.

"There 's the tea-bell. I 'll put your chair," said Burton, running away.

They took it in turns for two to escort her in, and the third to hold her seat in readiness. And it was not Burton's turn to attend to the chair.

One boy sat on either side of her, and the third next to his brother. Burton took the outside place, though he had the right to be near.

She poured out the tea in sore perplexity and distress.

"Nothing but dry bread for the bees," said grandpa, grimly.

It was a doleful meal. The bees took little interest in their dry bread, auntie was depressed and tired, and grandpa and grandma frowned at the children whenever they met their eyes.

"There 's the postman," said Bob. "If you 'll 'scuse me, auntie, I 'll go for the letters."

By this time the bees were capable of reading

addresses on the envelopes; that is to say, they knew that for some reason grandpa was always called Esq.; grandma, Mrs.; and Auntie Bell, Miss. Grandpa had been so contemptuous when at first they had given the wrong letters to people that they had been obliged to study the matter. To a certain extent they could make out the words, unless the writing was too erratic, but their sheet anchors were Esq., Mrs., and Miss. Also they had learnt grandpa's, grandma's, and auntie's signatures, and could recognise them anywhere. Auntie's they regarded as beautiful; and when she wrote those charming little notes with which she sometimes favoured them, and, instead of simply signing herself "Auntie," wrote her whole long, lovely name, "Mary Campbell Burnham," their pride was intense.

So now Bob, finding that the only letter was addressed to Esq., handed it to grandpa, who glanced at it and roared, "How dare that fellow write to me!"

"I don't know, grandpa," said the youth, politely, making up his mind that when he was a grown-up man he would never roar at people. It was n't pleasant.

Fortunately his reply was not heard. Grandpa thumped his hand down. "I have a great mind to return it at once!"

No one spoke.

After a while he cooled down and said, "Perhaps I'd better see what he says."

"Perhaps you had, dear," assented grandma.

So the letter was torn open. At the first sentence grandpa changed colour, the anger faded from his eyes, the white head suddenly drooped, and his face was hidden by his hand. Then he raised it again.

"He's *innocent*, Mary! Our boy is innocent!" he said brokenly. "They have found the real culprit! Thank God!"

Grandma burst into tears. "Oh, John! And we have been so harsh to him! What he must have suffered!"

"I'll write to him, and tell him to come home. I'll help him to start again," said grandpa, joyously. All Philip's sins and shortcomings were forgiven and forgotten in the relief of finding him misjudged in this last and worst affair.

"What does he say, dear?" asked grandma.

"I'll read it aloud." But as he picked it up to do so his eyes fell on the next sentence to that which he had already seen, and he paused with a puzzled expression. "What does this mean? 'Tell Bell that she will receive her dress, hat, and other fallals in the course of a day or two; and very glad shall I be to be rid of them, though they have done me good service. I must admit that I think they would have failed had it not been for the little bees. I thought all was up when that fellow thrust his head into the cab, but no doctor could have spoken more authoritatively than the bee. 'Shut that door! Auntie's got a toothache!'" I was sorry to have to leave them in the lurch at the panorama, and hope they got home safely, but I have no doubt they would. Smart little chaps! Necessity knows no law. Tell the kiddies I am sorry, too, to have given them such a fright a few days ago. Staunch little beggars, they are! Ask them all about it. They have hidden and fed me well!"

Grandpa paused with an air of perplexity. "What on earth does he mean?"

Auntie had grown very white. She understood. In imagination she saw her little ones left to themselves. She saw their eager interest gradually fade as they began to feel their loneliness. She saw them wandering the street, frightened and bewildered, at nearly midnight. Then, suddenly, she realised something else, too. She had pierced the secret of their altered behaviour. She knew that she herself had been tried in the balance, by their childish minds, and had been found wanting. She saw how loyal Bob had stood by her, how Bennie had endeavoured to cover her transgressions, and how Burton had broken down under his broken trust. Her passion rose high.

"The—the—the—" she panted, between fury and an endeavour to restrain herself before the children. But rage had its way. "The *brute!*" she cried fiercely.

Grandpa and grandma nearly leapt out of their respective skins. The bees immediately incorporated the word into their vocabulary. Beautiful! Strong! Expressive! And evidently the correct thing to say.

"Bell!" said grandpa. "What language!"

"The only wonder is that it is n't stronger!" gasped auntie, though it is difficult to imagine how much stronger it could have been!

"What does it mean?" asked grandma.

The bees stared with widely opened eyes.

"It means—it means, mother—it means, bees—" turning to the amazed children—"it means that Uncle Philip dressed up in my clothes and went with you in the cab. It was n't I, at all. It means that he took those little ones to town and left them there. It means that in his cruel selfishness he left them to find their

own way home, careless what danger they might run. It means—" She paused. What else had he said? Something about giving them a fright a few days ago. Again she saw three sobbing children, gasping out their terror of cold hands, dark holes, and rushing waters. "It means that of all the cruel, brutal wretches Philip is the worst!" she said, with a depth of passion in her tones no one would have given her credit for feeling.

"But it would be impossible, Bell!"

"Impossible? Not at all! Very easy! We know how cleverly Philip makes up as a woman in theatricals, and in this case no one would examine him closely. It was dark; the children would not notice, and the very fact of their presence would divert suspicion on the part of anyone else."

"But how would he know? How make arrangements?"

"Did you tell Uncle Philip, bees?"

"Told him we were going to a pannylamma in a cab with Auntie Bell," they replied, striving to understand.

"But about the clothes?" said Mr. Burnham.

"You told me yourself that he had been seen leaving the house. He could get what he wanted; there would be little difficulty. Any other man might have hesitated for the children's sake. But what would he care!"

"I don't suppose he thought, Bell," grandpa said hesitatingly. "He's careless at times. And he is innocent, you know."

"*Innocent!* Better a thousand times that he had been guilty! A *man* could forge! But to terrify

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children, to accept their aid, and then to lead them into danger, and leave them to get out of it as best they could! What might not have happened if they had not seen Mr. Coverdale! *Did n't think!* Does Philip ever think of anyone but himself? The coward!"

"Bell!" protested grandma, feebly.

But auntie was neither to have nor to hold! "If only I were a man! just for twenty-four hours! He should have the soundest horse-whipping! Bees, come with me!"

She swept out of the room, followed by her bewildered satellites, and leaving a stunned grandpa and grandma behind.

"Auntie!" whimpered Bob, in scared tones. "Don't be cross any more! Tell us what is the matter. Was n't it you, auntie? Is n't it a dirrylum?"

Auntie sank into a chair, and the terrified children clung round her. "No, darlings! it was n't I. It was——"

But she got no farther, she broke down utterly, and for a short time the four wept together.

When calmness was restored she made full explanations. Bob accepted them with satisfaction. His theory had broken down, but it had only been a theory; anything else would do as well. Auntie was perfect. That was all he knew. How that perfection was maintained was but a secondary matter—interesting—but not necessary to know. But Burton and Bennie burst out crying again, and were inconsolable.

"Bob said I'd feel badly when I found he was right. And I do!" sobbed Burton. "I'm glad, but I'm sorry too! You won't ever, ever love me again, auntie! What a wicked, bad, naughty boy I've been!"

"Me, too!" wailed Bennie. "Oh, auntie, do love us again! We're ever so sorry!"

It was long before they could be quieted. Tired and upset by their two days of excitement and misery, their tears once started were hard to check. Their loving hearts felt the horror of the accusations they had hurled against that perfection of womanhood, and they piteously implored forgiveness and renewal of forfeited affection, assuring her that if only she would overlook their wrongdoing this once, nothing—*nothing*, not even the evidence of their own senses, should ever again cause them to doubt her infallibility.

At length comparative peace reigned. Again they felt they had four "souls with but a single thought," four "hearts that beat as one." Once more they sat in that beautiful harmony they had thought never to feel again, and which past events made seem so far in the background. One chair again held them, auntie on the seat, Bob and Bennie each on an arm, cuddling her, and Burton, that still heaving little sinner, on her lap, where he could hide his face against her when the flood of his enormity came over him at intervals, making his face crimson with shame.

So absorbed had auntie been in trying to soothe the two who had doubted, that she had scarcely had a word for Bob; but now, as she leaned back in the chair, she laid her ruddy head against his shoulder, with a loving look that made the loyal little heart beat quickly.

"Now, my bees, I want you to tell me about Uncle Philip. How did you hide him?"

Very hesitatingly at first they replied to her questions, but being assured that he was gone, and would

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not come home again for a long time, and if he ever did she would take good care of them, they gradually poured out the whole story, and as she listened, and they told all they knew, and also, unconsciously, a great deal that they did not know, her anger rose high once more. But she restrained herself this time. She had already said more than she ought before such mimics.

"Auntie," said Burton tremulously, as, a short time later, she tucked them up in bed, "come here and kiss me. Are you quite, quite sure that you love me again—that you 're not only *saying* it?"

"Quite sure, darling; quite, quite sure!"

"Then I b'lieve I feel ten years younger," sobbed the child.

Auntie wondered how he managed it. She bade them "Good-night," as usual, lingering a little over her faithful champion to whisper, "My little Bobbie!" while the child hugged her with perfect satisfaction.

Outside the door she paused, hoping soon to hear the regular breathing that would mean sleep.

But she heard something else.

"Let 's have a toast, bees!" said Bob, rising.

And once more was that threefold toast drunk, which they had raised on the first night of their acquaintance, but how much more fervently!

"Auntie Bell! Gorblessers!"

And auntie went away softly, so as not to disturb them, with a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XIX

HALCYON DAYS

THEY were halcyon days that followed the great reconciliation. Everybody was happy. The bees had always been loving, obedient little boys, but now their love had a deeper foundation, their obedience was even more prompt and ready. Many times a day they hurried in from play to assure themselves that auntie still regarded them with undiminished affection. They had passed through the waters of affliction and come out strengthened; they had nearly lost their treasure, and its value was enhanced tenfold. Minnie, too, found life had savour. Sufficient was told her to let her know that her honesty was no longer called in question, and smiles once more illumined her rosy face. Grandma was most gracious to everybody. As for grandpa, well, no one could have made more honourable amends. He called his grandsons into his study, and after grunting out something that nobody could understand, presented them with a whole sixpence each.

Of course the money immediately began to burn holes in their pockets. Equally of course it must be spent, at least a portion of it, on auntie. What to get and how to get it became the chief question of the day.

She unconsciously assisted them in the latter diffi-

culty by asking them if they would go to town with her and shop.

Would they go to town with her? Would a bird fly? Certainly they would!

By dint of close observation they had discovered that the shops which held most attraction for her were those in which millinery, dress materials, or books were displayed. They themselves affected confectioners, toy shops, and live-stock. It is give and take in this world. They stopped unbidden whenever auntie's favourites were seen, and she waited uncomplainingly while they flattened their noses and gloated over their own.

"Auntie," said Bennie, thoughtfully, "suppose some one said they would give you the thing you liked best in all this wide world, what would you choose?"

"I don't know, Bennie! That's rather a large order! What would you?"

"Well, never mind about it being the thing you'd like best. Just let it be something you'd like, only don't feel quite justified in buying."

Auntie was gazing in the window of a draper's shop. Nine-tenths of her mind were fixed on her business, and the remaining fraction on the child's question. "I've longed for one of those little plush purses for years, but somehow I've never bought one."

"One of those marked '6—d,' auntie? What does '6—d' mean?"

"Sixpence, Bennie."

"What does it put a 'd' for? Ought n't it to be 'p'? Can't the shopman spell?"

"Oh yes, dearie, it's quite right! D means—it

means—now, what does 'd' mean? Really, I've quite forgotten. I'm ashamed to say, Bennie, I can't tell you. I'm sure I knew once."

Burton and Bob averted their gaze from shamed ignorance. Bennie hastened to console.

"Never mind, precious! Silly things like that are n't worth remembering. We would n't care about knowing even if you could tell us. Let's change the subject. Have you a lot to do in this shop?"

"Yes, dearie; it will take some time;" and auntie entered, smiling to herself appreciation of her bees' gentlemanly courtesy, and still vainly trying to recollect what "d" meant.

"If you like you may walk round and look at the things. I see some toys over there."

There were times when auntie preferred that six inquisitive eyes should not too closely inspect her purchases. The trio beamed. The very opportunity! But how to take advantage of it? A few moments' inspection showed them a gentleman whose sole business in life appeared to be to approach each customer, bend a sleek, deferential head, and say:

"What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, madam?"

To him they repaired.

"We want a plush purse," said Burton; "and, please, will you whisper, 'cause it's for a present for auntie."

"Certainly, sirs. This way, sirs. Miss Brown, plush purses!"

"Thank you very much!" said Burton, politely. "And now, will you please keep an eye on auntie, 'cause we don't want her to know anything about it."

If she gets finished before we do, tell her we are just 'tending to a little matter of business, and will be ready soon."

"Certainly, sirs!" and the obliging shop-walker went his way, smiling broadly, and adding to his multifarious duties that most important one of "keeping an eye upon auntie."

The three dragged up seats, knelt thereon, and whispered their anxiety to the amused attendant.

"Suppose she should see!" said Bennie. "It would spoil it!"

The lady behind the counter perceived the situation, and bringing out two large boxes, placed them in such a position as to hide the tray of purses. Radiant with smiles the children proceeded to examine them.

"It must be plush," said Burton, rejecting a leather one; "and it must be 6d."

"I have a great many of that kind."

The trio immediately grabbed at their special fancy.

"Blue is always my favourite!" said Burton.

"Black is so neat and ladylike!" pursued Bob.

"That shade of brown would shoot my 'ticklar kind of beauty, and ladies with red hair must be careful!" finished Bennie.

The bees were speaking in inverted commas. There seemed likely to be a hitch in the proceedings.

"Which do you think Auntie Bell would like?" asked Bennie, anxiously.

"Which is Auntie Bell?"

Gracious powers! Fancy any one not knowing Auntie Bell! This was indeed to argue herself unknown.

"That's her—by the counter—the lovely lady in the blue costoom!"

"If you 'll take my advice," said the assistant, seeing that negotiations would probably take some time unless she interfered, "you 'll have this one. It has a place for sovereigns, you see, which the other three have not. It's a peculiar shade of red, too, and most ladies like a touch of colour."

The last poetical idea did it. "We 'll take it!" they said as one man, handed over their sixpences, and watched with profound interest the making out of the bill. Their gratitude was boundless when 4*d.* apiece as change was bestowed upon them.

"Do you mind writing on the parcel, 'With love from the bees to Auntie Bell'?"

The girl did so, and the grateful children took leave. Then, thanking the shop-walker for his kind services, they awaited auntie's pleasure.

"Suppose, auntie," said Burton as they went out, "suppose anybody was to give you a purse, what colour would you like?"

He spoke rather doubtfully, conscious that his blunt and soldier-like mind was not fitted for diplomacy; that Bennie was the fellow to whom to entrust delicate negotiations.

"Oh, I don't know! Yellow, I think," said auntie, thoughtlessly.

The horrified dismay on the three faces could not pass unnoticed. With an inkling of the situation she hurriedly hedged. "At least, when I come to think about it I don't know that yellow would be serviceable. What do you say to green?"—this rather hesitatingly. The despair did not lighten. "I don't

believe that I care for green, though. What would you advise?"

"Red is very pretty, and most ladies like a tush of colour," quoted Bennie, rather tremulously.

"The very thing! Why did n't I think of red before!"

Once more the sun shone.

The presenting of the purse was a decided success. Some people are so silly about presents! They say, "Hullo! what's this?" and open it without more ado. Really, when one comes to think about it, such people are not worthy to receive a gift. But Auntie Bell! Her behaviour was most satisfactory. She sat down on the couch, and could hardly believe her ears.

"A present for me? From you? Oh, bees! How could you! How very kind! What can it be?" She felt it all over. "Let me see! It can't be a book. I should n't have cared for a book, either." The momentary anxiety faded. "And it can't be a tie. There's something hard in it. I have plenty of ties, too. I must really open it!" And when the contents were at last exposed to view, her gratification and surprise could only be alleviated by kissing the bees all round, examining the little purse, and kissing them all round a second time.

The whole affair was most satisfactory.

When you give presents to some people, when they are given, well, they are given—that's all!—and it's finished. But Auntie Bell was again superior to all others. She had a pleasant way of referring to it which made the bees feel good all over. "Burton, will you run up-stairs and get my pretty red purse?" Or, "Bennie, you'll find change in my favourite red

purse." Or, "Bob, don't drop my purse. It was given to me by some great friends of mine, and I would n't have it hurt for anything!" It was almost worth while to have passed through misery to reach such happiness. Life was indeed a pleasure, and separation, even for a few hours, scarcely to be contemplated. Therefore it was not to be wondered at when an invitation came from Mrs. Rouse for them to spend the day with Egerton that the bees declined it on the spot.

"I was thinking," remarked auntie, "that it would be rather convenient. I have an invitation from a dear old friend, who has been ill, to spend a few hours with her, and I thought if you went to see Egerton we could go to town together, I could leave you there, and call for you later."

There was something in this view of the question. The journey to town and back again would considerably shorten the separation.

"Don't you like Egerton, bees?"

"Oh yes, auntie! He's all right; but we don't like Mrs. Rouse. She's a brute!"

Auntie drew a long breath. The time had come to protest, though she knew very well what the answer would be.

"Burton, that's a rude thing to say."

"You said it, auntie, about Uncle Philip."

Miss Burnham knew it. Her life had been rendered a burden by quotations from those well-remembered remarks. The time had come for her to abase herself, and, if possible, gain immunity from further repetition.

"I know I did, bees; and it was very wrong!"

The bees smiled. The Queen could do no wrong.

"Oh no, auntie!"

"It was, bees! I was very, very naughty!"

Again the bees smiled. In most things auntie's judgment was correct. She was indeed perfect. But in this, and this alone, they must take the liberty of differing, for "conscious knowledge of her worth was the only virtue she had not."

Seeing the little impression she had made, auntie was obliged to humiliate herself still further. "You don't know how ashamed I am, bees, when I think of the dreadful language I used; and whenever you repeat anything it all comes back to me, and I feel hot all over."

The bees looked at one another. How sweet was this repentance, even if unnecessary! Though their more rugged masculine natures could scarcely understand this delicate womanly sensitiveness, still, not for them was it to wound a gentle heart! Not theirs the rough hands to brush the bloom from the peach! They could respect, though they could not comprehend!

"Auntie," said Burton earnestly, "we will never repeat a single thing you said again, if we can remember; and we will do our best to remember. Won't we, bees?"

"Yes, indeedums!"

"Oh, thank you, dears!"

"Not for worlds," pursued Burton, "would we cause that fond heart a bang!"

"Nor bring a brush to that fair cheek!" Bob took up the running—bewildered by his own observation, but with a memory which stood fairly firm, all things considering.

"Precious creashur!" finished Bennie.

The trio had lately assisted at an interview between Minnie and an ardent and poetical admirer, and their vocabulary was considerably increased, if not improved, in consequence. In the present instance their kind wishes were not fulfilled. Auntie's fond heart was "banging" with hysterical violence, and her fair cheek crimson with "brushes." Bennie's term of endearment put the finishing stoke.

"Darlings!" she murmured in extinguished tones, "you don't know how I love you!"

CHAPTER XX

THE SIGNATURE

EGERTON greeted his friends with delight. To his mother's annoyance his fancy for them continued in full force. From the first he had liked them, and had borne no animosity against Burton for the pummelling that young soldier had inflicted on him. Their heroic entry into the baths had filled him with secret admiration, though at the time he had derided. He was arriving at the time of life when he noticed, and in his heart wondered at, the fact that no one seemed to like him; that the companions whom he met dreaded and disliked playing with him. The bees had never been afraid, which was one of their attractions. Then, children being imitative, their pride in, and affection for, Auntie Bell found a ready echo in his heart. Not even the devoted trio endeavoured more eagerly to please her and to win her approval. Being a sharp boy he had quickly discovered that the way to do so was to show generosity, self-denial, or self-control. Therefore he endeavoured to cultivate these virtues. To be sure at present he only did so either at such times as she or the bees were present, or he had reason to believe that she would hear of his doings, but it was a start. Poor little Egerton! with no help from the one who ought to have been his guide and

friend in all things, he had at least set his feet on that narrow and difficult path which, through many struggles and failures, eventually led to the upright and honourable manhood he afterwards attained.

"Hullo, bees!" he shouted, as they entered his play-room. "Here you are at last! Why did n't you come sooner? Where is Auntie Bell?"

"Gone to see a friend. She sent her love."

"Did she?" said Egerton, with much satisfaction. "That's right! Do you think she does love me a bit? Why did n't she come in? Has she done anything specially clever lately?"

"Not *specially*!" said Burton, carefully, as though clever things which were not special were done by the thousand. "Where's Miss Smith?"

"She's gone home with a bad headache. Is n't it jolly? Now we have no one to bother us all the afternoon."

"What did she take for it?" demanded Bob, with professional interest.

"I don't know, doctor. I'm awfully sorry I forgot to ask!"

Egerton had learned his friends' intentions as to their future callings, and naturally was exceedingly anxious to settle his own. The bees urged him not to be in too great a hurry about deciding, as he must remember that it was for life, while, on the other hand, he ought not to delay unnecessarily, as every day passed was so much time lost. He was desirous of fixing upon something that would not separate him from them, and was hesitating between war correspondent, chaplain to Burton's forces, and band-

master, with a secret hankering, of which he was ashamed, towards the lowly but fascinating position of a drummer boy.

"Come and look at my rocking-horse," he invited.

The trio shouted with admiration. It was indeed a noble steed, with dappled skin, vermilion nostrils, glaring eyes, and flowing mane and tail. So large was it that four people could be accommodated at once. Burton mounted his back, Bennie and Bob seated themselves at the ends, on the rockers, clinging respectively to his nose and tail, while Egerton, with great generosity, after first telling the bees that they must let Auntie Bell know about it, took up a comparatively uninteresting position underneath.

The ride that followed was furious.

Even Burton admitted afterwards that he thought the animal had got beyond control, and that an accident must happen; while as for Bennie and Bob, they confided to each other that when at one moment they found themselves soaring towards the ceiling, and the next they were on the ground, their red hair positively rose, and they feared that every moment would be their last. All were far too proud to acknowledge fear, and in the end it was Egerton who, remembering his own sensations when he first rode, and admiring his friends' courage, called a halt, and suggested an adjournment to examine his toys.

The four were soon absorbed: Egerton in showing off, and the bees in examining, his treasures. So engrossed did they become that the maid, who had been commanded to look after them in the absence of Miss Smith, felt herself at liberty to pay longer and longer visits to the more attractive region of the

kitchen, till at last the children were practically left to their own devices.

Then the spirit of mischief, which is never far removed from boys, took possession of Egerton.

"I say, bees! have you ever seen any firestones?"

"No; what are they?"

"They are beautiful stones which are all alight. If you look into them you can see the flames, red and green and blue and yellow, and all kinds of colours; but if you touch them they are quite cold."

Another of the attractions which the trio had for Egerton was that they never doubted his word. They might think that he made mistakes—indeed, that his mistakes were rather frequent; but then, even that "being so perfect and so peerless" who was "created of every creatures best" admitted that she made mistakes, therefore who could escape?—but they never doubted that his intention was to speak the truth. Feeling now that his tale certainly tested their powers of credence, though to the best of his belief he was speaking correctly, he was gratified to find that they accepted it.

"Show us," suggested Burton.

"Come along, then. Mother keeps them in a cabinet in her room, but I know where she hides the key."

Mrs. Rouse possessed a pretty taste in precious stones, and when her jewel cabinet was unfastened the brilliant contents spread before them might have delighted more critical eyes than those bent above them.

For the next quarter of an hour all four were very happy and busy. They fastened bracelets round

their ankles and wrists, hung chains about their necks and waists, and pinned brooches and other fancy ornaments on various parts of their persons.

"Look at me!" shouted Egerton, prancing about in a ray of sunshine which made him glitter and sparkle. "Look at me! I'm the Queen of Sheba!"

The bees hastened to join her jiggling majesty, and to proclaim that they, too, were Queens of Sheba.

"The bother is," said queen number one, "the bother is, bees, that I can't show you the best of all, 'cause it's in a secret drawer."

"What's a secret drawer?"

"Where is it secret-ed?"

"And what's in it?" demanded the three in succession.

"The drawer is somewhere in the cabinet. I saw mother open it one day, but she was very cross when she noticed I was there, and would n't show me how she did it, though I howl—" He stopped abruptly. Egerton was beginning not to be proud of getting his own way by howling. "Though I begged her," he finished lamely. "She pressed somewhere, and out the drawer jumped."

Immediately the cabinet was subjected to severe pressure on all sides, out and in. Not an inch did the persevering quartette leave untouched, and finally the desired result occurred.

No one knew who did it, but suddenly something leaped. All four jumped violently in response, and the drawer and its contents were flung broadcast on to the floor.

Down scrambled the dismayed children.

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Egerton. "Who did

that? Pick them up! What will mother say! Not that it matters much, though. With such a lot of things I don't s'pose she 'll care if one or two are lost."

With this comforting reflection they gathered all they could find.

"Here's a letter!" said Egerton, picking it up. "Where did that come from?"

"Out of the drawer," said Bennie. "I saw it jump when the firestones did."

"Let's put it back, then."

"Can you read letters, Eg?" demanded Burton, proud of his own accomplishment. "We can! At least, we can enough to tell who they belong to. Let's see that one. Oh, yes! It's all right. There's the 'Esq.' It belongs to the gentleman who lives in the house."

"Then there is n't one!" responded Egerton, not sorry to be able to prove his friend in the wrong.

Burton was by no means disconcerted. "There must be! Think again! Auntie Bell said so."

"Auntie Bell? Did she?" pondered Egerton. It was now his duty to prove her correct.

"It was this way," pursued Burton. "When first we learnt we thought Esq. meant grandpa, 'cause we always had to give those letters to him, but auntie said no. It meant any gentleman, but mostly the master of the house."

"The master of the house!" exclaimed Egerton. "Why did n't you say so before? I know who that is. It's Mr. Coverdale. I heard cook and Maria talking about it one day. Cook said, 'It's evident who is going to be the new master of this house, if missus can get her own way,' and Maria said: 'I

don't know that he seems keen on it, cook. In fact, I don't think missus has broken the news to him yet.' Then they both laughed. But it does n't matter whether he 's keen on it or not," pursued Mrs. Rouse's hopeful son. "Mother always gets her own way. So you may be sure that that 's all right. It 's Mr. Coverdale."

The logic was unanswerable. No one doubted for a moment that the rightful owner was found.

"Can you read insides as well as out?" demanded Egerton, withdrawing the enclosure, and handing it to Burton.

"Well, no, we can't!" responded that gentleman, reluctantly. "Insides are so very much harder. The only one we can is—Bees! bees!" he broke off with a perfect shriek of delighted recognition. "It 's the singycher, bees! It 's auntie's beautiful, beautiful singycher!"

For a brief space the letter was in danger of being torn to pieces as all four clutched—Burton to retain, and the others to get possession of, the precious missive. Matters were compromised by it being spread out on the floor, while they lay round it, with their chins on their hands, and their heels kicking joyfully in the air.

"Do tell me what a singycher is!" begged Egerton.

"It 's that!" said Burton, pointing to the closing words, written in Auntie Bell's clear round handwriting—

Yours very sincerely
Mary Campbell Burnham.

"We can read that!" said Burton, proudly, checking off each word with his forefinger. "Your—loving—auntie—Mary—Campbell—Burnham."

It never struck the youth that the formula addressed to himself and his brothers might possibly vary to another person. No! What was good enough for them was good enough for anybody else.

"What are those funny lines under the words?" inquired Egerton.

The bees looked up sharply to see if disrespect was meant, but nothing was further from Egerton's mind. Admiration and curiosity alone showed on his countenance, and Burton explained:

"That's what she calls the 'culiarity of her hand. It's a lovely 'culiarity of hand. When we see those lines stuck about we always know the letter is from Auntie Bell, even when we can't read it."

"I say!" ejaculated Bennie, sitting up and looking disturbed, "ought n't we to take it to the Esq. at once? Grandpa is awfully angry when he does n't get his letters the minute they come. He roars: 'It's a 'markable thing that I cannot be attended to! A most mis-mis-mannered household!'"

"When I'm a grown man," said Burton thoughtfully, "I'm not going to roar at people. I'm going to say, 'Thank you, darling!' like auntie does, when my daughter or my grandsons bring me things. When a person says, 'Thank you, darling!' I want to do something else for them, and when they roar I wish I had n't done anything."

"It's much easier to be cross than to be kind," objected Egerton.

"Anybody can do easy things!" said Burton, con-

temptuously. "Auntie Bell thinks nothing of a man who does n't do hard ones."

Egerton sighed. "Well, I s'pose I'll have to try."

"When I'm a grown man," said Bob, slowly, "I'm going to say to grandpa, 'Fetch your old letters yourself! I'll never do it again!'"

"Bob!" gasped his brothers.

But Bob's obstinate jaw set itself strongly.

"You would n't say that to auntie?" asked Bennie.

"I'll go for auntie's letters as long as I can drag one foot after the other," responded Bob, the severity and firmness of his countenance relaxing into a loving smile.

"But," said Bennie, bringing round the conversation to the point in question, "what about this letter? It ought to be taken to the Esq.!"

"We don't know where he is, so it can't be," said Burton.

"I do, though," put in Egerton. "He's in the drawing-room. At least, I expect he is by now. Mother said he was coming this afternoon."

"We can't possibly go in the drawing-room without being told," said Burton.

Egerton stared. Mrs. Rouse's rules and Mrs. Burnham's were not alike in the smallest particular. "Why can't we? I always do; especially when Mr. Coverdale's there. I run down and say, 'How are you? I heard you were here, and have come to see you,' and then mother gives me sixpence afterwards. When I say, 'What an age it is since you came! Do come oftener!' she gives me a shilling."

The bees gasped. They counted their money by

pennies, not by sixpences and shillings, save on two great occasions.

"Why don't you always say it, then?" inquired Burton, when he had recovered sufficiently to speak.

"'Cause then it would grow common, and p'r'aps she 'd give only sixpence."

Egerton was not deficient in acuteness.

"Come along, bees! I 'll give him the letter."

"Our auntie wrote it. It 's ours! We 'll give it," said Burton, growing red.

"It 's my house."

"We 're the visitors."

"Well, I found it, anyhow."

It appeared as though the harmony of the afternoon was about to be destroyed, but at the last argument Burton handed over the bone of contention.

"So you did. I 'd forgotten."

Egerton flushed, and hesitated. "I b'lieve I 'll let you give it after all," he said, with an effort.

"No, it 's all right, Eg! is n't it, bees? It would n't be fair! I 'd forgotten! That 's all!"

Egerton's self-sacrifice did not rise to the extent of insisting. He clutched the letter, saying gleefully: "But you must tell Auntie Bell I offered, all the same. Offering is just as generous as doing it. That 's two nice things I 've done this afternoon. She 'll soon have to love me really, I 'm growing so good, and not only have to try."

A child is keen in recognising the favour or disfavour in which it is held.

"Come on!" shouted the boy.

They tore down-stairs. Egerton was the first to race into the drawing-room, shouting, "A letter for

you!" as the bees, with their small backs tingling recollectively, paused outside those dread portals to pull down their tunics, give an uneasy glance at each other's ruffled hair, and then enter with a sedateness of deportment fitted to the place in which they found themselves.

Mr. Coverdale nodded good-humouredly.

"Well, Egerton, how are you? And the little bees, too? A letter for me, do you say?"

"From Auntie Bell," supplemented the trio, in a breath.

"Oh! Let me see! Did she tell you to give it to me?" Mr. Coverdale stretched out his hand rather eagerly.

"Oh, no!" laughed Egerton. "We found it in mother's firestone cabinet."

Mr. Coverdale was glancing over the little note which had taken Bell Burnham so long to compose many years ago, over which she had smiled so shyly and happily, and over the remembrance of which she had afterwards shed such shamed and bitter tears.

It was brief.

April 1, 19—

"DEAR MR. COVERDALE,

"I shall be at home to-night, and shall be pleased to see you. I am,

"Yours very sincerely,

"MARY CAMPBELL BURNHAM."

Twice he read it with a rather puzzled expression. "Which of you has torn it open?" he demanded suddenly and sharply.

"None of us! It was open!" protested Burton. "Was n't it, Egerton?"

"It was open when we found it in mother's firestone cabinet," assented Egerton.

"What do you mean? What are firestones?"

Mr. Coverdale again looked at the letter, and this time his eyes fell on the date. He did not start, but slowly something gathered in his face which made the dismayed bees move closer to each other. They knew what was the matter. The letter had not been delivered immediately. In a moment there would be the angry roar, and complaint of a mismanaged household. But it did not come. Only when he spoke again it was in low tones, which made small hearts thump tumultuously.

"Where do you say you found it?"

"In mother's firestone cabinet—" began Egerton.

He was sternly interrupted.

"Not you! Be silent! One of the bees."

If the hateful suspicion which had entered his mind had any truth in it, it must not be Egerton who betrayed his mother.

The boy pouted. "I found it!" he muttered rebelliously. "It was me that found it—not the bees."

"Egerton found it," assented Burton, answering the grim look that bade him speak. "It was in the box, and we saw it was for the Esq., and auntie says an Esq. is the master of the house, and Egerton said——"

"I told them you were going to be the master of this house as soon as mother could persuade you," burst in the irrepressible youth.

Darker and darker grew the man's face.

"Go on!" he said.

They told their tale, with a child's skill in leaving out the main points, and dwelling upon unnecessary details. But Mr. Coverdale was accustomed to extracting truth from natures ignorant as children, though by no means as innocent, and he quickly understood.

Then came the tap-tap of high heels, and Mrs. Rouse entered.

"What grave faces!" she said gaily. "Is anything the matter?"

"Only a delayed letter," said Mr. Coverdale, grimly.

"Delayed? I hope not for long. Was it important?"

"Yes—for very long—and it was most important!"

Without relaxing his hold he held it out to her. The shock was too sudden. Had she had a moment's preparation the result might have been different. As it was she shrank back with unmistakable guilt in her blanching cheeks and frightened eyes. The man turned away with almost a physical feeling of nausea. To treachery and deceit he was accustomed, and long had held them as part of his daily life. But not treachery at home in England, not deceit in a fair woman whom he had regarded as one of his best friends. She had been so kind, and had welcomed him so warmly when he had returned, shattered in health and depressed by his enforced idleness, to find that his old companions were scattered abroad, or their lives filled with new interests in which he had no part, while he had no energy to make new ones. Certainly as he had grown stronger he had begun to feel some irritation on discovering how completely she had taken possession of him, and had made

several efforts to break away. But it had proved difficult. She was forever making some request, or asking his opinion—slight things which, he told himself, it would be churlish and impossible to refuse, and yet which were always bringing them together. No one had been more friendly, and he was ashamed of the ingratitude which found her chains a trial. And now all this kindness and fair seeming was but a cloak that had hidden falsehood. He was too startled and shocked to speak.

Mrs. Rouse recovered almost instantly. "Yes," she said quietly and calmly, "I detained the letter. I admit it. But it seemed the lesser of two evils. Had I my time over again I should do the same. Yet it has lain like a nightmare upon my conscience. You must hear my explanation, Mr. Coverdale."

She stood erect, a noble woman cruelly misjudged! She might possibly have erred, but it had been an error of judgment only! Her motives had been pure!

The children looked on with wide-eyed interest. No one spoke to them. Mr. Coverdale had forgotten their presence, and even had he remembered he would have considered them too young to understand. Mrs. Rouse knew better. She was well aware of the uncanny aptitude with which a child comprehends exactly the point it is desirable he should not know. Also she was aware of the peculiar talent of the bees which rendered them unsafe listeners to a conversation which was private. But she dare not waste the few moments necessary to ring the bell and have them taken away. She must not give Mr. Coverdale time to think. Instinctively she knew that if she did

not immediately win his credence or forgiveness her fate, so far as this man was concerned, was sealed. Her influence over him was gone forever.

She went straight to the point.

"Bell Burnham never cared for you," she began, and paused a second, dismayed by the sudden increase of interest and intelligence in the three faces at the sound of the beloved name. But there was no help for it. "She used to laugh at you, and make fun of your devotion."

Ridicule is hard to bear, and she flashed a keen glance, but the cold, stern face showed no sign.

"I do not mean," she added hastily, "that there was anything worse than a girl's natural carelessness and amusement. She had not yet awakened to the realities of life, and did not realise that her fun meant another's pain. I spoke to her, and implored her to think what she was doing, and how cruel, how unwomanly, was her conduct. I bade her remember that a man's affection is a sacred thing."

"A man's defection is a sacred thing," echoed Bennie, his fancy caught by the phrase, or the tone in which it was uttered.

Mr. Coverdale did not hear the soft murmur. Mrs. Rouse did, and it brought her down from her flights in a moment. She flung a furious look, which ought to have annihilated the enterprising young mimic, but Bennie's mental eyes were turned inwards, as he endeavoured to place the touching sentiment in a safe place in his memory, whence it could be produced with the greatest effect, and he did not notice.

Mrs. Rouse was beginning to feel sorely hampered.

Had it not been for the presence of the children she would have burst into tears—tears are very useful when employed against a tender-hearted man,—but suppose the frightened four were all to burst out crying also; or perhaps they might take it as a pantomime got up for their special benefit, and shout with laughter and applaud. Either contingency was too dreadful to contemplate. Had Egerton been alone she would have clasped him to her bosom, and sobbed: "Plead for your poor mother, darling! Say she intended no wrong!" But one cannot clasp four children to one's breast, and beg them to plead!

"I believe you were about to tell me how this letter came into your possession," came the cold, stern voice.

As on a former occasion the little bees were standing as unconscious champions of their absent auntie, and revenging many a slight inflicted upon her, many a tear shed in secret.

Not daring to attract their attention again by the use of her name, Mrs. Rouse plunged into a labyrinth of pronouns.

"It was a day or two before you went away. I called upon her, and found her laughing over a letter from you. She would not tell me the contents, but hinted at them, and told me that she was going to have some fun. In vain I implored her to consider. She said that teasing never did a man harm, and that she had written to you. Then, as I still pleaded, she grew vexed, and half laughing, half angry, pushed her letter into my hand, and said: 'There! I am very busy and can't go out, but you shall post it for me, and then you will be as wicked a sinner as you make

me out to be.' She ran away, and I was left. What was I to do? To detain it was dreadful; to post it still more so! I thought and thought, and at last—at last——”

She paused, and looked up pleadingly, holding out clasped hands.

Deeply interested in an attitude so new, and so effective, the three also clasped and held out their hands, while Egerton, profoundly impressed, copied their example. They were standing behind Mr. Coverdale, but Mrs. Rouse had the full effect.

There was no softening of the hard face. “You decided to detain it, I suppose?”

For once in her life Lucy was absolutely at a loss. If only the children had not been there she felt that even now she might win the day. But they were there. Frightened and dismayed she broke down in reality, instead of artificially.

“I may have done wrong; I fear I have done wrong! But it was for your sake I did it, Brian—it was for your sake I did it!”

“Miss Burnham, please 'm!”

Never was an interruption more inopportune.

The children saved the situation.

With a shout of delight Egerton rushed forward and clutched her hand. The bees, remembering the sacred precincts in which they stood, nevertheless moved quickly to her side, and beamed a silent welcome.

Bell Burnham had heard that last cry, and fury at the pang which rent her had brought an unusual brightness to her eyes, and an unusual animation to her manner. Mrs. Rouse did not guess the cause, but the result made her heart sink.

It was not in the nature of man to be grateful at being saved from so charming a woman.

Besides, she reflected bitterly, men are but sheep. Let but one admire a girl and all his friends flock round to discover the particular charm which she possesses. There never was a woman engaged yet but some man felt he had been robbed of his life's happiness, even though the successful wooer was a comparatively new acquaintance, while the bereft one had known her from infancy. A man has set the seal of his approval on her, therefore she must be worth having. Where one goes the others follow. So even the little bees' fervent admiration and affection for auntie had their influence. Since their arrival many had discovered that she had a most attractive personality who had never given her a second thought before.

On the present occasion she chatted brightly for a few moments, before saying: "No, I can't stay, Lucy. I am late now. Bees, put on your coats, dears."

Egerton was clamouring for her to take off her hat, to come up to his nursery, to have tea with him. At this he showed signs of a roar of disappointment. She laid a repressive hand on his shoulder.

"Not now, Egerton! But if you are good I intend inviting you to spend a day with us next week."

"What day?" demanded the boy, pinning down the invitation.

"Monday," responded Miss Burnham, uttering the first name that came into her mind, and quite forgetting, in her anxiety to get away, that she had arranged a large wash for that day.

"I'll come!" said Egerton, gleefully. "Bees, I'm coming to see you next Monday!"

The trio had returned with a promptitude for which their aunt inwardly blessed them, and were struggling with their outer garments.

Five minutes later they were in the street, giving an excited account of the doings of the afternoon. Rocking horses, firestones, secret drawers, and signatures were mixed up in their usual confusion. But for once auntie paid no attention to their chatter. Had she realised that in their loving hearts there was but one signature in the world, she might have made more particular inquiries. As it was, the significance of their remarks passed by her.

Her whole mind was filled with a wonder as to what combination of circumstances could have provoked that cry of "It was for your sake I did it, Brian—it was for your sake I did it!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE STORM

"PLEASE 'm, it 's a quarter-past three."

Miss Burnham sat up with a prodigious yawn. "Is it really, Minnie? It seems only five minutes since I lay down."

The evening before, Mrs. Burnham had suddenly been taken ill with one of the acute attacks of pain to which she was subject. For the whole of the night her daughter had been in close attendance, and when morning came and the attack subsided, she had plenty to do in the disorganised household. At length, finding that her mother seemed quite restored, she left her peacefully reading, to snatch a few hours' sleep, with orders to be roused at a certain time.

"And, please 'm, I 've brought you a cup of tea. I thought it might freshen you up like."

"Oh, Minnie! How very considerate of you! It is just what I want!" and Miss Burnham beamed upon the gratified maid. "Where are the bees?"

"On the island, mum. I gave them a dinner-basket and told them to play in the shed. I thought it best to keep the house as quiet as possible."

"Quite right! Why, Minnie, how it is raining!" she exclaimed, as a gust of wind sent a shower clattering against the windows.

"Coming down like jiggery pokery, mum!" said Minnie, pleasantly. "Regular tem it has, ever since you went to sleep. I never saw such a storm. And there's a gentleman just called to see you, mum."

Minnie paused in astonishment, for her mistress had flung down her cup, leaped out of bed, and was dragging on her clothes with frantic haste.

"He won't go without seeing you, mum," she protested. "He's down-stairs. There's no need to fly round like that!"

The visitor below, who had been left by the agreeable Minnie, whose intentions were excellent, but whose ideas of etiquette were primitive, with the injunction, "Take off your wet coat, sir, and turn down your trousers, while I tell the mistress," paused in amazement at the racket upstairs. Surely it betrayed a most flattering anxiety to rush into his presence! But as the noise continued he felt that that explanation was scarcely adequate. The door was flung open, and Bell tore down-stairs at a pace which made him wonder in amusement why she did not make use of the banisters, as on a former occasion. But it was evidently no time for joking.

"What is the matter, Miss Burnham?" he ventured, as she raced past him.

"Oh, my bees!" she gasped.

He hesitated for a moment, and then followed in anxiety. Why not? He had been in the kitchen before. He found her tearing open the back door, and felt that the time had come to remonstrate.

"What's the matter? You can't possibly go out in this downpour with nothing on your head. What do you want? Let me go!"

But Miss Burnham was already in the field. Mr. Coverdale was a man of sense. Finding that he could not hinder, he decided that the best thing was to help. The next moment he was beside her.

"Take my hand!" he said peremptorily, and hand in hand they raced over the wet and slippery grass.

It was a romantic and sentimental attitude, but Bell felt as much romance and sentiment as though the hand to which she clung had been a walking-stick. So that she was saved from falling, and thus checking her speed, and was helped to a safe footing, she cared nothing as to who was beside her.

Mr. Coverdale, ignorant of her anxiety, was not quite so indifferent, and his clasp had something in it more than mere assistance. He did not speak, however, but wisely directed his efforts towards keeping the perpendicular, and hindering, as much as possible, the slides which were inevitable. The field was a fairly broad one, but the stile was reached at last and negotiated with little loss of time.

"Oh, look!" panted Bell, pointing to the rapid, turbulent stream which had taken the place of the gentle trickle of the morning.

Mr. Coverdale uttered an exclamation of dismay as he began to have some inkling of the cause of their race. As they neared the water's edge he caught sight of the stepping-stones, or rather such as were left above the stream, which now surged, in the case of some, completely over, and dangerously near the tops of others.

Bell snatched her hand away, and caught up her dress before he realised her intention.

"You can't do it, Bell. You shan't do it! Let me!" he cried.

But it was too late. Rapidly she sprang from stone to stone, till she came to the first submerged one. Then she paused and steadied herself. It was not deep, but the stream was flowing strongly, and she must not slip. She gave one involuntary gasp as she stood in the cold water, and then resumed her way. In one or two cases she had to spring over a space which she dare not step into, for the stones were uneven. Close behind her kept Mr. Coverdale, with his heart in his mouth at nearly every step she took, expecting every second to see her fall, and his keen eyes noting the point to which he must make when they were both in the water, which surely must happen soon. But neither her nerve nor her strength failed, and he breathed a fervent "Thank God!" as she sprang to the opposite shore, and pursued her headlong course up the bank.

"Bees! bees!" she called. "Where are you, bees?"

"Here, auntie, here!"

A chorus of welcoming shouts and barks greeted her, and Mr. Coverdale, arriving on the scene, came upon a conglomerated heap of auntie, boys, and dog.

"We 've been quite good," they assured her, when peace was restored. "We did n't go out into the rain, but we are most awfully glad you 've come, auntie. It got a bit lonely here when it rained lots, and winded at the same time. Wind says such horrid things when one is alone."

"I suppose," said Miss Burnham, looking at Mr. Coverdale, and, for the first time, appearing to recognise him as something more than a living walking-

stick—"I suppose there is not the slightest chance of getting them back? We could n't cross those stones again?"

"Quite impossible! Had we been five minutes later we could not have crossed ourselves. We're prisoners."

"I'm afraid so. What a mercy we came in time! I think I should have gone frantic if the children had been here alone without my being able to get to them."

"Auntie," said Bob, "all the bottom of your dress is wet, and your shoes are squelching, and your hair is soppy."

"It is!" laughed auntie. "But it can't be helped, Bobbie."

"What I'm afraid of is digestion of the lungs, or ammonia," said the far-seeing doctor.

Burton and Bennie listened in admiration. What a lot Bob knew of the diseases and disorders to which flesh is heir! No one deserved his diploma more than he!

"We must hope for the best, doctor," said auntie.

"I'll tell you what! If that gentleman does n't mind looking another way we could squeeze the wet out of your dress, and——"

"Certainly, certainly!" interrupted Mr. Coverdale, retiring to the doorway and looking out with a broad smile of amusement, while the blushing lady within got rid of as much water as possible.

"You can come back now," said the doctor. "I b'lieve, auntie, that if I wrap up your legs in this rug" (auntie winced. Why did the bees always find it necessary to allude to those parts of her anatomy in

the presence of this special acquaintance?), "and put this other one over your shoulders," pursued the unconscious Bob, "and you take a dose of camphor as soon as you get in, we may ward off the worst defecks."

"Auntie," said Burton, when these arrangements were completed, "can't we go home? I b'lieve I'd like a house a lot better than a shed in this weather."

"That is just what we can't do, Burt. You see, the stepping-stones are covered, so we shall have to be patient for a time."

"How long does this kind of thing last?" demanded Mr. Coverdale.

"I fear we can hardly expect the water to sink in less than a couple of hours after the rain stops," said Miss Burnham, uneasily.

"Oh, it's all right, auntie, if we can't," said Burton, with soldier-like acceptance of hardships. "I did n't know they were covered. The river must have got deep very fast."

"It did, dearie. It is liable to these rapid risings during storms in the autumn. If I had been awake I should have brought the children home as soon as it began, but I was sleeping after a night's nursing of my mother, and Minnie knew nothing of the danger," explained Miss Burnham to Mr. Coverdale.

"All right!" he assented cheerily. "We might be in many a worse situation. If it were not for you being so wet it would only be fun, would n't it, bees?"

"I am quite warm with my run. I daresay I shall take no harm."

"I hope not."

There was a few moments' pause, and then Mr. Coverdale said: "Bees, have a game at Robinson

Crusoe. You may never have the chance of being on a desert island, from which you can't escape, again."

The idea was greeted with delight, and the children immediately set about arranging preliminaries. Of course, Burton must be Robinson; but then equally, of course, Bob must be Robinson; as for Bennie, naturally Robinson was the only part he could take under the circumstances. To an outsider this might have been held as a barrier to further progress, but the bees had their own ways. They accepted their threefold personality as one, and proceeded to divide out the lesser characters. Not that they expected their seniors to play with them; they would merely be lay figures. As the only masculine grown-up of the party, Mr. Coverdale was at once cast for Man Friday. Over the goat and parrot they hesitated for a while. But Poll's superiority in the matter of legs finally marked him out for the goat, while auntie's conversational powers made her a most fitting subject for the parrot.

"Listen to our parrot talking to Man Friday," observed Burton, proudly, to his brothers—at least, Robinson Crusoe remarked to himself: "A most 'markable bird, that, my dear sirs! Don't bark, goat! We're coming to play."

"I received a letter from you yesterday," Man Friday said abruptly to the parrot, as he seated himself beside her on a bench.

"That I am sure you did not!" responded the parrot, promptly. "For the good and sufficient reason that I have n't written one."

"It has been delayed, I admit," said Man Friday, grimly. "But it is from you."

The parrot shook her head. "Some mistake, I

think," she replied, watching with interest as a pocket-book was produced, and a letter withdrawn from it and held out to her.

Then suddenly she gave a gasp, the blood rushed to her face and slowly ebbed away again.

During the pause that followed Miss Burnham thought of many things. First of all there came to her recollection the bees' chatter of the day before, and their account of a letter, firestone cabinet, and a "singycher." Then her mind flashed back to that spring day, so long ago, and the walk with Lucy to the post, and how her attention had been distracted for a moment while there. Then the letter had never been sent! Lucy had not been so cruel as to do that, after all, though she had pretended that she had! But now, how had it got into Mr. Coverdale's hands? What tale had Lucy told when she had given it? Not the correct one certainly, or he could not have been there demanding an explanation.

"It is from you?" he said slowly.

"Yes," she assented faintly.

Then she pulled herself together, and inly spoke to herself severely. Why should she blush and tremble? She had long passed her youth, and was now middle-aged—elderly—old! The time was past for youthful tremors. Why should she not tell the truth?

"Yes," she assented again, but this time steadily. "I wrote it; but it was under a misapprehension."

"What misapprehension?" he asked quickly.

Again she had to remind herself of her exceeding antiquity before she could answer. Surely, surely she had arrived at that time of life when she could speak

easily of the follies of youth, and need not even feel embarrassment at discussing them with a young man! They had happened so long ago. There was a slight discrepancy here. In those ancient times she had been considerably the junior of the man whom she now designated young; but Bell did not trouble about discrepancies.

"I was under the impression that you had written to me," she said, feeling that the world-famed She was but an infant in point of years beside herself. "I am aware now that I was mistaken. Shall we talk about something else? Is n't this weather charming!"

"But I *had* written to you," responded Mr. Coverdale, ignoring this surprising observation. "What makes you think I had not? I wrote saying that I loved you, and asking you, if you cared at all, to let me come and see you; and you never replied."

Bell's head swam. Her first feeling was one of absolute joy! Then that well-remembered letter had been from him! He had loved her once. She had not wasted her life over a man who had been always indifferent! How the misunderstanding had arisen she could not imagine, but the knowledge of his past love was happiness, and a justification for the impossibility she had felt of putting any other man in the place he had occupied for a few short hours. Of course, it was too late now, but it had been—it had been—and that would be happiness forever.

"I am sorry," she said slowly.

"Bell," he said eagerly, "you don't know how I waited and longed for your reply, and when it did not come, and I realised that you had no love for me, I went away wretched."

Bell faced him, feeling that she could not bear much more. "I am sorry," she repeated gently. "I don't understand it. But it is long past now—we need not think any more of it."

"What is past?" he demanded. "My love is not past. It never will be. I went away loving you—you have been the only woman in my thoughts during my absence—and I have come home loving you. When I arrived and found that you were still Miss Burnham my hopes rose; then when I saw you that first time, and found you as young and sweet and fair as when I left, while I had grown old and battered, they sank again. Then the little bees put me off the track by saying that you were no longer an—" He paused abruptly. "Forgive me," he whispered, and somehow he got hold of her hand, and, in spite of years, wrinkles, crows'-feet and—no, not grey hairs,—she could not withdraw it,—“no longer an old maid. I made some inquiries of Mrs. Rouse, without letting her know my reasons, and she hinted at a secret engagement.”

"Oh, how could she!" burst out Bell, involuntarily.

"Then it was n't true, Bell? It was n't true? I have thought so lately." He had his arm round her by this time. "I am not worth taking—least of all by you, dear—my health is broken, I shall never again be the man I was; and I 'm older even than my years. But I love you; I have always loved you; and you—you have n't changed your mind, have you?"

He paused. Bell was half laughing, half crying. Which was the more absurd, that she was young and sweet and fair, or that he was old and worthless, she did not know. Age had vanished, and with it the

calmness suited to it. "Oh, Brian!" she whispered, and somehow that low exclamation settled everything.

The bees watched these and subsequent proceedings with growing dissatisfaction. Auntie was theirs, and theirs alone. No one, *no one* had the right to—to—well, to do as that man, that interloper, was doing!

Closer and closer they edged, their eyes blazing, their cheeks burning. War was in their hearts. They were going to fight, like men, for their own.

Then Captain Burton—the soldier—the natural leader in all battles, laid a possessive hand on her lap.

"She's ours!" he said abruptly; "all ours—not yours! Get away! We're her little boys!"

Mr. Coverdale looked up quickly, and met the three furious faces.

"But I'm the big boy, bees! You remember a big boy was wanted? I'm the big boy!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE BIG BOY

THE big boy! The big boy! How often had they lamented in secret the absence of the one who was necessary, absolutely necessary, in conjunction with small boys, to save their beloved from being—oh, words of hateful, loveless meaning!—an old maid! And to think that he had been near, close by, all this time, and they had never recognised him. They had even, oh, horror! in their short-sighted ignorance nearly driven him away when at last he had appeared. The rosy faces were beaming with smiles. No thoughts of jealousy marred their unselfish delight. They thrust their hands deep in their pockets, planted their sturdy legs wide apart, and beamed.

"We've saved her!" they burst out simultaneously. "We've saved her! Us and you together have saved her!"

The gallant rescuers gazed with open pride and satisfaction upon the result of their prowess. The agitated rescued did not know which way to look, nor which of the four pairs of eyes she found the most embarrassing. She endeavoured to hide her confusion by kissing three of the heroes, while the fourth, finding himself left out in the cold, promptly attended

to what was at the same time his duty and his pleasure—himself.

"Auntie," said Burton, when they were once more ready to attend to mundane affairs, "let us go home. We're tired of this shed, and the doctor's worried about your wet legs and clothes."

"I fear a chill," remarked the doctor.

"So do I," said Mr. Coverdale, uneasily. "Are you very cold, dear?"

Cold? Bell felt as though she did not know the meaning of the word. No wet legs—why could n't they say feet?—or damp clothes could chill the blood that was dancing and tingling through her veins.

"No, indeed! But I feel an object!" she laughed, secretly thankful that wet only made her hair curl the more.

"An object!" echoed the indignant Burton. "You're a sight for sore eyes, auntie. Is n't she?"

Mr. Coverdale nodded an approving assent, and auntie resumed precipitately: "But, Burt, dear, I told you why we could n't go home. The stepping-stones are covered."

"But could n't you swim, auntie? It is so horrid here, and the doctor is so worried about the effects of the damp upon your conser—conser——"

"Tina?" suggested Bennie, dubiously.

"Tution," put in the well-informed medico, hastily. "Consertution, auntie. Yes, could n't you swim and carry us over. Or, if it's too strong for you, could n't Mr.—Mr.——"

"Uncle Brian," prompted that gentleman.

"Oh no!" gasped auntie.

"Bell!" said Mr. Coverdale, sternly, "do you mean to say that I am not their Uncle Brian?"

"Of course you are not!" responded Miss Burnham, with what spirit was left in her.

"Well, I shall be in three weeks' time, so it's all the same."

"Three weeks!" ejaculated the paralysed lady.

"Do you think it is too long?" demanded Mr. Coverdale, eagerly. "Bell, how sweet you are! We'll make it a fortnight, then. To-morrow would n't be too soon for me."

"I did n't mean—you know I did n't!"

The protestation was ignored, and he resumed: "I don't approve of long engagements, and I'm glad you agree with me."

"Long!" Miss Burnham felt swept away and helpless. "Why, it's not half-an-hour since——"

"Bell, I'm ashamed of you!" There was a mischievous ring in Mr. Coverdale's voice. "We have been engaged for years."

"I don't know how you make that out." Bell resolutely avoided the eyes that so persistently sought her own.

"Did n't I practically ask you to marry me before I went away?"

"I—I suppose so."

"And did n't you, in reality, accept me? You know you could n't in honour have refused after this note." He tapped his breast where the letter lay.

"Per-haps-not."

"Then we were engaged! We have n't known it, but that is our own ignorance, and has nothing to do with the actual facts of the case. We have been

engaged for years, and will be married in a fortnight, as you are so good as to think three weeks too long to wait!"

"Brian, I did n't—I don't—" began Bell, and then stopped, too disconcerted to proceed. Instead, she sprang to her feet.

Mr. Coverdale followed her example, slipped an arm round her, and holding her so that she should not escape, said teasingly: "You were about to say something, precious. I thank you, bees, for teaching me that word."

The trio flushed with gratification. How agreeable of Uncle Brian! Using their own particular form of endearment was such an admission of their oneness. Such a graceful manner of acknowledging his indebtedness to them, too!

Auntie drew a long breath. "It has stopped raining now." (As a matter of fact it had stopped for a long time.) "I believe it would do me good to take a little exercise. Shall we go and see if the stepping-stones are out of water, darlings?"

"Certainly!" responded the only member of the party whom she had not intended to include in this term of affection.

She flushed crimson, opened her mouth to speak, closed it again, and made for the outer air. The shed was growing sultry.

Mr. Coverdale followed, and slipped a hand through her arm. "That 's right!" he said cheerfully. "Much better not to say anything. You 'll soon get used to it. Lead the way, bees!"

Shouting and laughing the trio scampered out, delighted to find that they had to jump small streams

that were pouring over their path, and to wade others still broader. The ground was slippery and greasy, and Bob was the first to come to grief.

"Oh, I say!" he ejaculated, picking himself up again. "What a blessing that it is only my old shoot, auntie!"

Auntie was never cross because of an accident, and in the present case was in that state of mind which would have accepted with equanimity the spoiling of a whole wardrobe of suits, old and new.

"Never mind, Bobbie! Don't rub it, and I can easily get the dirt off when it is dry."

"Bell, you are really the cleverest of women! How you know those children apart is beyond me. They are as alike as three peas—or bees."

"Do you think so? To me they are very different."

"Some of them are bobbing up, auntie!" shouted Burton, intending thus to convey the information that the stones were reappearing.

"So they are," said Mr. Coverdale, with satisfaction. "I think I can manage, Bell, with a bit of wading. I'll take two bees over first."

Ability to swim, even but a little, removes most of the fear of water, and Burton and Bennie immediately prepared to start, followed precipitately by Mr. Coverdale.

With a greater understanding of the power of the stream and the danger of a slip, Auntie Bell looked on uneasily.

"Let's all go, auntie," said Bob, with the sympathetic comprehension of her feelings he had always shown. "We would n't want to live, would we, if Uncle Brian and the bees were washed away?"

It would be much happier to be all drowned together."

In the middle came a break owing to a couple of the stones being still under water. Mr. Coverdale stepped down cautiously, and lifted first Burton and then Bennie on to the next one visible.

"Bell, can you wait a minute till I get these two ashore? Are you at all dizzy?"

"No! but don't be long," and auntie grasped Bob's shoulder, fearing lest in the moment of waiting the child might grow frightened.

"Are you giddyfied, precious? You can hold on to me," said the boy, comfortingly. "The water does look black and swirly and horrid, does n't it? But Uncle Brian won't be long. Here he comes!"

And in a few moments all were safe ashore, and the danger past. The children cheered frantically.

Then did Mr. Coverdale win the bees' hearts forever. Looking back over the stones that had been their path to safety they caught sight of Poll, whimpering and whining on the other side of the gap, putting down first one paw and then the other, but not daring to plunge into those rapid waters.

"Oh, poor old chap! we can't leave him!" he ejaculated, and springing back, once more waded cautiously over the gap and grasped the dog's collar. "Come on, old fellow! Come on!" and the cheery voice rousing his doggish courage, Poll was partly hauled, partly swam to safety, where he was greeted warmly, and speedily made the younger members of the party as wet as himself.

"Now for home as fast as you can!" said Mr. Coverdale, and laughing, shouting, slipping, and slid-

ing they scrambled on their way. The bees rolled over half-a-dozen times in their haste, but should trifles such as these disturb the great minds of men who had saved an auntie and been real, true Robinson Crusoes? Never!

Two hours later, warmed and comforted, Mr. Coverdale and Miss Burnham were sitting by the fire talking happily. They were discussing the events of the past day, the past few months, and the past years.

The bees had temporarily disappeared.

"What bothers me," said Mr. Coverdale, "is how Mrs. Rouse managed to know about the matter. Of course she saw your letter, and probably took her chance of it being of importance. But how did she know my side of the question? What made her suspect at all?"

"I have been thinking about it," said Bell, slowly. "Did you happen to meet her on the way to the post?"

"Well, I did! As a matter of fact she was in the shop when I was buying stamps, and might—yes, she certainly might have seen the address. But, my dear child, she could n't read the inside."

"Perhaps not; but you would hardly be likely to write to me for nothing, would you? Did you speak about me at all to her?"

"I don't know—I suppose I did. We walked a little way together, I remember. I daresay I did mention your name—casually, of course!"

Bell looked at him, laughing and blushing.

Mr. Coverdale laughed too, though he reddened. "You think I probably said enough to give a clue, you mean?"

"I should think that without *knowing* anything she had very strong suspicions, and called on me the next day to find out whether they were correct. She managed to get hold of my letter, and of course that would satisfy her. Chance practically told her of your intentions, and she was quick and clever to make her opportunities, and seize them when made, and the result has been unfortunate for us."

"Unfortunate for us, indeed! I thought you were friends; but since yesterday, since I got your letter, many things have occurred to me. I have been duped and deceived from the beginning. It has been my fault! I have been a fool! Ever since I came home she has misled me. How she has contrived it all I cannot say, nor can I now understand how I have not seen through her before. But I could not imagine her capable of pure malice, and there seemed to be no reason—that was what perplexed me—no reason!"

But Bell noted that he spoke in the past tense, and avoided looking at her. However ignorant he had been till the day before, there was little doubt but that Lucy had thoroughly enlightened him then, and knowing her well, she had some notion of the scene he must have passed through. She could not wonder at his anger and disgust, but all she said was, "I don't think Lucy ever cared for me."

"No!" he assented grimly. "But we have done with her now! Why, Bell," he broke out passionately, "she has robbed us of years of happiness! We ought to have been married long ago! Never, never shall you speak to that woman again!"

Bell was silent. She could not feel very angry with

Lucy. All the pain and trouble were past, and she was now entering into her kingdom. A woman hearing the first protestations of love cannot wish that that eager love was changed into the calm, steady affection of a husband. The latter may be far the more valuable and enduring, but it is not longed for at first. A newly engaged woman cannot regret that she is not a wife of many years' standing.

She did not utter these reflections, but merely said gently: "It is over and done with now, Brian. We must forgive and forget."

"You're too generous, Bell! At present I don't feel any inclination to forgive. It is not altogether a matter of forgiveness, either. Who can tell what further ill she may work if she has the chance? That woman never crosses our threshold!"

Again Bell was silent. It was useless speaking when Brian was in this frame of mind. Perhaps as time went on his righteous anger might grow less, and then she could endeavour to heal the breach. Not that she was anxious for Lucy's friendship, but there was little Egerton. She could not help feeling that she owed a debt of gratitude to that youngster. Besides, at present his strong affection for her and the bees was the only influence in his life for good. She must not, in her new happiness, altogether lose sight of the boy.

"Here come the children!" she exclaimed with relief, as a clatter of childish feet was heard. "Oh, and there is the front door knocker!" She half rose, and then sat down again, smiling. "Minnie is out, but the bees are attending to it. You have no idea, Brian, what clever, useful little fellows they are."

The door burst open, and they tore in. This was their own special play-room. It was no breach of etiquette to laugh and talk here.

"Well, dears?"

"Auntie!" shouted Burton. "We have an idea! We have a thought! Bennie thought of it first, but as soon as he said it we thought it too."

"Wait a bit, Burt! Who came?"

"Only that old—only Mrs. Rouse, auntie."

Brian flushed angrily. "You shall not go, Bell! I'll see her myself!" he said sternly.

"Oh, she's gone! She would n't stay."

"Why not, Burton? Whom did she want?"

"You, auntie. But I said you were engaged to Uncle Brian."

"Burton!" Auntie sank down, crimson with blushes.

"Was n't it right, auntie? The other day when the gardener wanted to see grandpa Minnie said: 'You can't. He's engaged to Mr. Smith.'"

"'With,' Burt; not 'to,'" gasped his unfortunate relative. "Oh, how could you!"

"Is n't it the same thing, auntie?" demanded the youth, rather disconcerted. "Well, there is n't much difference, is there?"

Mr. Coverdale's anger had died away, and he broke into a laugh. "No, there's not much difference, old chap—not much! In the present instance there is n't any. Don't bother, dearest! It will save us the trouble of announcing it. Besides, 'Uncle Brian' would have given it away without that other little slip. What did she say, Bee?"

"Nothing, uncle. Not a thing! It was n't a bit

polite. She just glared, and went away without even saying, 'Good-night!'"

"What is your idea, Burton?" inquired auntie, feeling that a change of subject would be beneficial.

The three brightened. "Bennie thought it—" began Burton again.

"Well, I did n't 'zactly *think* it. It *thinked* itself. But it's this. Uncle Brian is a bee too. We're all bees together. Auntie Bell, Uncle Brian, Bennie, Burton, and Bob."

"Ye powers!" exclaimed that gentleman, much struck. "So I am! We were made for each other, Bell. I always knew it, and now this is proof."

"If only we'd thought of it before, and told him, what a lot of bother we could have saved! It's an awful pity!" commented Bob.

Never could auntie be sufficiently thankful that the bees had only just learnt Mr. Coverdale's Christian name. Her hair rose at the horror of the thought of what might have happened had the idea entered their intelligent red heads sooner. And Brian, watching delightedly, read her like an open book.

"I wish you had, bees! It is, indeed, a world of pities! But things have come all right without it."

Then he knelt down and clasped both Bell's hands closely.

"I have an idea, too, bees! I have a thought! We are the bees, right enough—a perfect hive of us—but auntie is the Queen Bee—our Queen Bee, is n't she?"

The children shrieked with rapture at this new and poetical idea. Like their namesakes they clustered about her—Bennie on one arm of her chair, Bob on

the other, and Burton, swarming up the back, managed to get astride of the top.

"The Queen Bee!" they chorused, their rosy loving faces beaming with delight. "The Queen Bee! Our very own Queen Bee! Yes, indeedums! Gorblessers!"

THE END

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